

# *Hindu Rites & Rituals*

*(Sentiments & Sacraments)*



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Sadhu Jnaneshwardas  
Sadhu Mukundcharandas



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Ahmedabad

## **HINDU RITES & RITUALS**

**Inspirer:** HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

**Blessings:** HH Mahant Swami Maharaj

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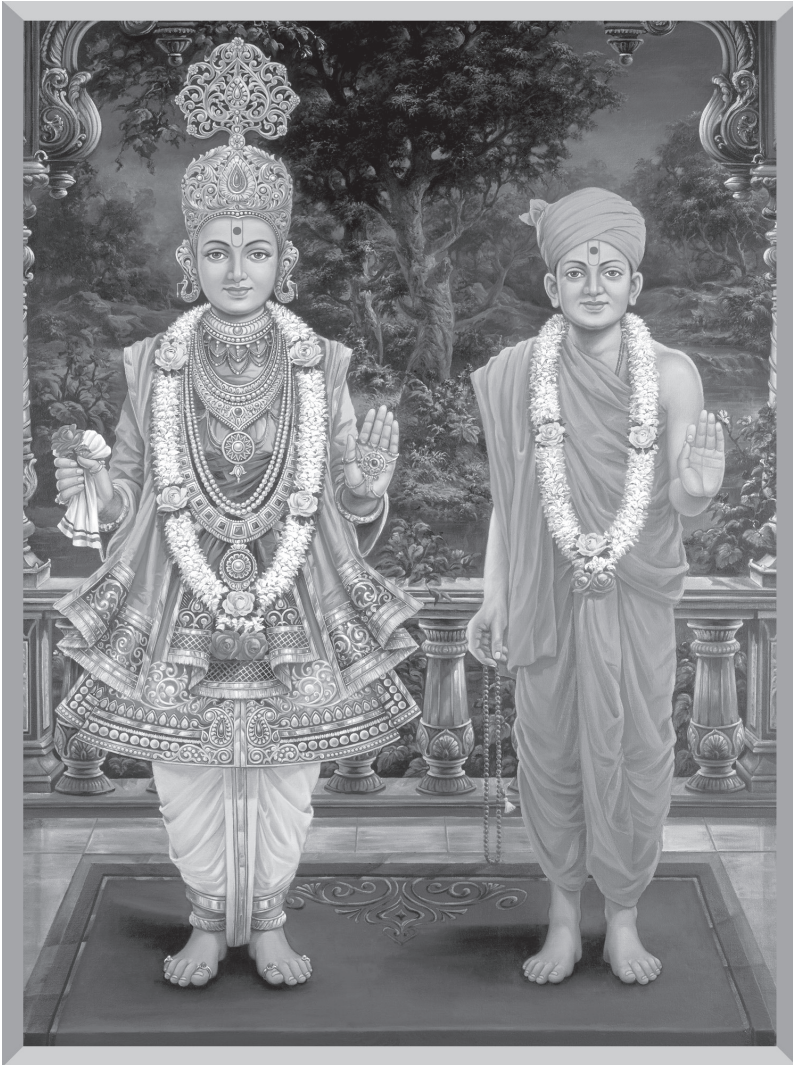
**Published & Printed by**

Swaminarayan Aksharpith  
Shahibaug, Ahmedabad-4  
Gujarat, India

Website: [www.baps.org](http://www.baps.org)

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*Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj*



## Dedication

*We dedicate this book at the lotus-feet of  
Bhagwan Swaminarayan,  
and to His present successor,  
His Divine Holiness  
Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj.*

**List of major injunctions by HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj, cited in this book regarding current trends.**

(1) **Inauguration ceremony** - by performing puja at the doorway, untying a knotted nada-chhadi and cracking a coconut on the doorstep, rather than cutting a red ribbon.

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(2) **Birthdays & Anniversaries** - lighting divas and offering scrumptious food in the home shrine or nearest Mandir, rather than blowing candles and cake cutting. xviii

(3) **IT** - to use internet with great discretion. Avoid violent video games. If possible avoid the use of cellphones in the Mandir, especially in katha. xix

(4) **T.V.** - to watch with great discretion, limiting oneself to news, sports and educational documentaries. 144

(5) **Navaratri** - Males and females should perform the traditional Gujarati Ras-Garba, rather than disco styles, in separate premises. xix

(6) **New Year's Day** - Celebrating it on Kartik Sud-1, Hindu New Year's Day, rather than 1st January. xix

(7) **Waking up** - Before 6 a.m. everyday, including weekends. 14

(8) **Daily Ghar Sabha** - Family gathering for worship in the evening. 70

(9) **Newly-weds** - undertaking a tirth yatra-pilgrimage-to the sacred shrines of the sampradaya in India, instead of expensive honeymoons elsewhere. 132

(10) **Four Bb's** - To sincerely observe : Bhasha - fluency in one's vernacular, Bhusha-decent clothing, Bhojan - traditional vegetarian diet, preferably home-made and Bhajan-devotional worship, all in accordance to Hindu Dharma's ideals. 156

## Publisher's Note

At the outset, a few words on the usage of “Hindu” in the book’s title. Etymologically, the word denotes a geographical area in northern *Bharat* (India). When the Persians arrived from the north-west to *Sapta Sindhu* - the land of the seven rivers, they pronounced the Sanskrit “S” as “H” in Avesta, similar to “J” being pronounced as “H” in Spanish. Hence from *Hapta Hindhu* evolved the words *Hindu* and *Hindusthan* - land of the Hindus. Later it suited the colonials to add “ism” to “Hindu” for the culture and tradition of the people of Bharat, creating a grave misnomer for all time.

Incidentally, the Greeks too lacked H(è), thus pronouncing Hindu as *Indos*, from which arose “India.”

Nevertheless, the true appellation for all that encompasses Bharat’s Vedic principles and cultural beliefs and traditions is *Sanatan Dharma*. Its approximate rendering is “The Eternal Tradition,” since the word *Dharma* has no equivalent in any of the world’s languages.

The reasons for retaining “Hindu” in the title then are twofold; for the convenience of readers, especially in the west, and to conform with the world’s current library cataloging system.

In considering “Rites and Rituals,” the rishis of the Hindu Dharma prescribed injunctions and observances known as *vidhi-vidhanos*. These inculcated in man humane virtues, qualities which rendered him a creature different and higher to animals. These observances wrought aestheticity and order in his life, simultaneously edifying it. However, by advocating these *vidhanos*, the rishis ultimately aimed to place man on a greater realm, of *moksha*-salvation. Through the physical observance of the rites and rituals, they refined his physical, mental and spiritual being.

Here, by the inspiration of His Divine Holiness Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, an attempt has been made to understand these rituals.

Swami Jnaneshwardas has taken great effort to fulfil this need. In addition to translating the Gujarati edition, Sadhu Mukundcharandas too, has contributed by incorporating the following additional textual material : Bhagwan Swaminarayan-Life & Work, Padharamani, Utsava, Yagna, Dan, Tirth Yatra, Sixteen Samskars, Ahar Shuddhi (redacted) and the Appendices.

For Hindus living abroad, a marked contrast exists between the Hindu environment at home and that outside. Young people often wonder about the principles underlying the Hindu rites, Hindu marriage sentiments and observances of diet. This edition attempts to explain these. Those studying away from home, who wish to cook their own vegetarian cuisine amid tight academic schedules, may relish the fast-cooked-no-hassle recipes in appendix 4.

### **Note on translation**

Throughout this book liberty has been taken to maintain usage of some Gujarati and Sanskrit words. The reasons are threefold :

(i) Many words in the Hindu Dharma have no equivalents in English or their translated meanings may not do justice to the meanings of the original words.

(ii) To avoid repeated usage of long-winded translations.

(iii) To familiarise the non-Hindu reader with common Hindu religious terminology. For this, a special Glossary has been included.

### **Pronunciation**

The pronunciations of all non-English words used in this book are given in the glossary. But in the text, only one type of diacritic mark has been used for simplicity. The Sanskrit and

Gujarati long ‘a’ has been written as a, and is pronounced as in: art, car, cart.

### **Preface to the Second revised edition**

The *Sixteen Samskars* considers in detail the sentiments of the Hindu marriage system, as enjoined by the rishis. The final sacrament, Antyeshti incorporates the unique death rites performed in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

The final chapter, on *Ahar Shuddhi* (diet purity) has been redacted. Now emphasising the Upanishadic ideals of diet purity, it examines how subtle observances of diet affect the mind and the Atma (soul). This lofty concept attains relevance as fast-paced lifestyles force people to increasing use of commercial products, irregular meals and unwholesome foods.

Finally, several new appendices have been added, which provide supportive and interesting details of rituals and traditions associated with the chapters on the Sixteen Samskars and Ahar Shuddhi.

– Authors  
April, 2001

# Bhagwan Swaminarayan

## Life & Work

Bhagwan Swaminarayan incarnated on Chaitra Sud 9, Samvat 1837 - 3rd April, 1781, in Chhapaiya, near Ayodhya, the birth place of Bhagwan Ramchandra. Named Ghanshyam by a sage astrologer, the arrangement of the zodiacal signs revealed that he was an incarnation and would lead a great following.

Ghanshyam's precocity was evident in His mastering Sanskrit, the Vedas and other shastras by the age of eleven. Around this period, He defeated learned Sanskrit scholars in Banaras, by giving a convincing exposition on the *Vishishtadvaita* Philosophy (qualified non-dualism).

He left home soon after, heading for the Himalayas - the mystical haven of the yogic masters. He visited the *tirths* (holy places), shrines and monasteries and personally observed the moral and religious decadence in these places. To the heads of mandirs and monasteries, He often requested details of the five eternal realities, namely : *Jiva, Ishwar, Maya, Brahman* and *Parabrahman*. Nowhere did He receive a satisfactory reply.

In one forest area in the Himalayan ranges, He met Gopal Yogi. From him He mastered *Ashtang Yoga* - eight-fold Yoga, in a short span of nine months. It would, if at all, take a person a lifetime of harsh austerities to master this discipline.

Ghanshyam, now known as Neelkanth during His forest sojourns, then headed south. After reaching the southern tip at Kanyakumari, He travelled northwards. He arrived in Gujarat after an arduous trek covering over 12,000 km, on foot in seven years. In Loj He met Swami Muktanand, a humble sadhu, acting as the head of an ashram in the absence of his Guru, Swami Ramanand. Here, Neelkanth received satisfactory answers regarding the five eternal realities. He decided to stay,

His heart won over by the purity of the *ashram* and the strict disciplinary codes practised by the *sadhus*. While awaiting the arrival of Swami Ramanand He served by washing clothes, cleaning the *ashram* and begging alms. He taught the other *sadhus* meditation and *Ashtang Yoga*. All the *sadhus*, including Muktanand Swami, were impressed; profoundly attracted by this young emaciated celibate with a divine, lustrous face.

Nine months later, Swami Ramanand met Neelkanth. He initiated Him into the *sadhu*-fold, naming Him, Swami Sahajanand and Narayan Muni. To his disciples, Ramanand Swami had always proclaimed himself as a mere drum beater, in a play heralding the arrival of the chief actor. This actor had indeed arrived in the form of Sahajanand. One year later, in 1802, he ceremoniously appointed twenty-one-year old Sahajanand as the head of the *Satsang* - the holy fellowship. On this occasion, Sahajanand Swami requested two boons from His Guru. Firstly, He asked that if ever the disciples faced the begging bowl, then the bowl should come to Him instead of the disciples. Secondly, if ever they faced pain equivalent to the sting of one scorpion, then that pain should be transferred to Him, multiplied ten million fold on each pore, but the disciples should not have to suffer any pain! Ramanand Swami granted the two boons, which remain a landmark in the history of the Hindu Dharma.

Soon after Ramanand Swami passed away, Sahajanand Swami then gave the *bhaktas* (disciples) the “Swaminarayan” *mantra* to chant. He then became known as “Swaminarayan”. The *bhaktas* also addressed Him as “Shriji Maharaj” or simply “Maharaj”.

People started experiencing a trance-like state called *Krupa Samadhi*, an altered state of consciousness, the highest state of realization which only results after mastering *Ashtang Yoga*. In *samadhi*, they saw the deities or the incarnations they happened to believe in, all by His grace (*krupa*).

He then began upgrading society by lovingly convincing the people to abolish the practices of female infanticide and *Sati* - the immolation of the widow on the pyre of her dead husband. Alongwith establishing alms houses, He appointed His *sadhus* to dig wells and ponds in many villages where there was a chronic water shortage. Before embarking on improving the morality and character of the people, He catered to their fundamental needs of food and water. Later, He introduced them to *bhakti*, offering devotion to God.

Swaminarayan then held large festivals in which He invited thousands of *bhaktas* from all over. In these festivals, He outlined the specific rituals and rites to be performed by the bhaktas. He also explained their true spiritual significance. This served to eradicate the false modes of devotion propagated by corrupt Brahmin priests. They had misled the masses into partaking of meat and liquor as *prasad* - sanctified food and indulging in adultery and gambling during festivals in the name of Dharma. He advocated *ahimsa* and established non-violent yagnas to prevent the cruel slaughter of animals. Contemporary Brahmin priests and religious heads rebelled. They thwarted His efforts on several occasions, but failed.

Swaminarayan re-introduced devotion to God, on sacred occasions such as Krishna Janmashtmi - the birthday of Shri Krishna, when people customarily whiled away the day gambling and feasting.

He advocated fasting and scriptural reading on this day, as well as singing *kirtans* - devotional songs extolling the glory of Shri Krishna. This effectively controlled the senses and directed them onto a higher, spiritual plane.

The uplift of society was by no means an easy task. However, through His sublime love and teachings, accompanied by His ascetic fold of *sadhus*, He won over the hearts of even the toughest and most pugnacious elements. These included :

Kathis, Kolis and Kanbis. They gave up their lawless ways of looting and plundering, and took to farming and trade instead. With the help of His *sadhus* He made devotional worship to God available to all.

These *sadhus* were known as *Paramhansas* - the highest order of renunciates in the Hindu Dharma. They lived by begging alms, walked barefooted and moved continually through the countryside to uplift the people. They also observed the vows of eight-fold celibacy (*nishkam dharma*), non-attachment (*nis-sneha*), non-ego (*nirman*), non-taste (*nis-swad*) and non-avariciousness (*nirlobh*), known as *Panch Vartamans*. This invariably invited the wrath of the existing order of renunciates called *bawas* and *vairagis*, who mercilessly persecuted and inhumanely beat the *Paramhansas*. Many were even slain by the *bawas*, for there was no formal policing force during that period. It was but the rule of the sword. Gladly tolerating the torturings, the *Paramhansas* did not flag from their devotion to Bhagwan Swaminarayan. On several occasions, He too was pursued by Vama Marg Brahmins and ministers of the temporal powers then ruling over the various feudal sub-states of Gujarat. The *Paramhansas* taught the peasants to develop faith in God, presently manifesting as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The *Paramhansas* removed their fear of witchcraft, sorcery and superstitious elements.

Swaminarayan's teachings were based on living a life upheld by *Dharma* - observance of *Sadachar* - righteous living. By His influence, even a notorious looter such as Joban Pagi, and the prostitute of Jetalpur became ideal devotees. Swaminarayan eradicated the baser instincts of ego, lust, anger, greed and hate from the hearts of such sinners, giving them a new direction in life. He taught that a *Jiva* (the Soul) could be cleansed of sin and attain liberation (*moksha*) in this very birth.

His basic philosophy stresses that the *Atma* (pure Soul) is separate from the three bodies - the gross, the subtle and the

causal, and above the three *gunas*, namely *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The *Atma* identifies with *Brahman* (*Aksbar Brahman*) and offers devotion to *Parabrahman* - Bhagwan Purushottam. This is mediated by the living *Brahman* - the *Gunatit Sadhu*. Thus, the *Jiva* successfully transcends the cycle of births and deaths and maintains its individuality i.e. it does not merge into Bhagwan Purushottam as a river merges into the sea.

For the disciples, He wrote a sacred code of conduct, the *Shikshapatri*, which was to be read everyday. His teachings were compiled in the *Vachanamrutam*.

For female disciples, He made special provisions to worship in separate mandirs, on an equal calibre with the men. He appointed women knowledgeable in the *Satsang* literature to preach to the other women. He revolutionized society by giving women an equal opportunity to educate themselves, offer devotion without undue restrictions and be able to reach an exalted spiritual status.

Towards the end of His life, He built six huge mandirs of exquisite beauty and architectural genius. He installed the *murtis* of Radha and Krishna, Nar and Narayan, Laxmi and Narayan and others. This was in consonance with the Hindu philosophical tradition of worshipping God with His choicest *Bhakta* or consort, known as *Bhakta-Bhagwan* relationship. In His own lifetime two million devotees worshipped Him as God.

His edifying work impressed the colonials, who were still having a tough time elsewhere in the land. This induced Major General Sir John Malcolm, Governor of the Bombay Presidency, to meet Him in Rajkot on 26th February 1830. Sir Malcolm asked for blessings and a written form of His teachings. Swaminarayan gave him a handwritten manuscript of the *Shikshapatri*, which is preserved to this day in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, England.

Fulfilling His mission to re-establish *Dharma*, He would

manifest in the *Satsang* through His *Gunatit Sadhu*. On 1st June, 1830, at the young age of 49 years, Bhagwan Swaminarayan departed for His divine abode, *Akshardham*. His first successor was Gunatitanand Swami, one of His foremost *Parambansas*. He, in turn, bequeathed the *Gunatit* lineage to his disciple, Bhagatji Maharaj who was followed by Shastriji Maharaj, who established the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan (BAPS) sanstha. He constructed five grand mandirs in Gujarat, consecrating the *murtis* of Akshar (Gunatitanand Swami, the choicest devotee) and Purushottam (Bhagwan Swaminarayan). He was succeeded by Yogiji Maharaj in 1951, who spread the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya* to Africa and England. He consecrated the first Swaminarayan mandir in England in 1970, in Islington, north London. In 1971, he bequeathed his successorship to His Divine Holiness Shri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth and present *Gunatit Sadhu* in the spiritual hierarchy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Swamiji's maxim is,

“In the joy of others, lies our own,

In the progress of others, rests our own,

In the good of others, abides our own.”

For the past 30 years he has constantly travelled throughout India and the world for the good of mankind.

Under his guidance and auspices, the BAPS sanstha implements multifarious socio-spiritual activities:

Medical : Free medical aid, food and clothing during natural disasters and organizing diagnostic camps for the poor, holding blood donation camps. Pramukh Swami Health Services, a unit of BAPS, also runs: a 100-bed hospital in Botad, a 50-bed hospital in Dabhoi - to primarily serve Adivasis (tribals) and 7 mobile dispensaries in tribal areas of Panch Mahals, Valsad, Bharuch and Sabarkantha districts and 3 in Kachchh. The Pramukh Swami Health Care & Research Centre and

BAPS Herbal Care - manufactures Ayurvedic products, in the Amdavad mandir's complex. Swami inaugurated a hospital in Atladara (Vadodara) in February 2001 and will inaugurate another in Surat later in 2001.

Relief Aid : BAPS sanstha ia always the first to rush aid to victims of natural calamities and the last to leave. It sent aid to 84 villages in Jagatsinghpur and Kendrapara districts of Orissa, in the aftermath of the 1999 super-cyclone. It has reconstructed 4 villages.

In September 2000, BAPS aided victims of heavy floods in Navadwip and Krishnanagar in West Bengal. After the 26th January 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, 175 sadhus and 4,500 volunteers rushed relief supplies to 409 villages in Kachchh and Saurashtra. Eight villages have also been adopted for total reconstruction.

Educational : Running youth hostels, schools in Gondal, Ukai and the first Hindu school in England - the Swaminarayan Independent School, opposite the new mandir, in Neasden, London. A residential school for girls, "Swaminarayan Vidyapith" was inaugurated in Anand in November 2000. Pramukh Swami Institutes of Information Technology have been founded in Vadodara, Vidyanagar and Amdavad.

Environmental : Planting thousands of trees each year and promoting dry well-recharging projects. Up to Dec. 2000, a total of 104 check dams have been constructed in the chronically drought-prone areas of the Bhavnagar district. Other ongoing construction of rainwater harvesting structures include underground tanks, gully plugging, percolation tanks and farm ponds.

Social : Organizing mass dowry-free marriages for poor couples every year and anti-addiction programmes.

Spiritual/Cultural : Continuing Bhagwan Swaminarayan's tradition of constructing mandirs, Pramukh Swami Maharaj

has built several (and counting), magnificent stone edifices.

In November 1992, he inaugurated *Akshardham*, a pink stone memorial, dedicated to Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. The associated complex houses exhibitions, a multimedia show and a state of the art audio animatronics presentation unparalleled in India. Collectively, they depict ancient Hindu wisdom, scriptural lore and Indian Culture.

The second edifice is the grandest traditional Vedic style mandir beyond Indian shores; consecrated in Neasden, north-west London, in August 1995. With the ground breaking ceremony held in September 1992 and the *murti* consecration in August 1995, it has been the fastest mandir to be built in Hindu history. Marble from Carrara, Italy and Ambaji, India and limestone from Bulgaria were skilfully sculpted in India, prior to being assembled with precision in London. Hailed as “once in a millenium” by *The Independent*, London, it has earned a coveted place in the 1997, and the 2000 Millennium editions of the Guinness Book of World Records. Adjacent to the Mandir, there is a traditional wooden Haveli, bewitching visitors with its intricate carvings.

Since 1995, Pramukh Swami has consecrated similar stone *shikharbaddh* mandirs in: Surat, Rajkot, Surendranagar, Mahelav, Tithal and Nairobi. Nearing completion, the mandirs in Sankari (near Bardoli) and Bharuch will be consecrated in 2001.

In October 2000, he performed the Vedic *khat-vidhi* (ground-breaking ritual) of an *Akshardham* in New Delhi. It was Yogiji Maharaj’s cherished wish that such a mandir be consecrated on the banks of the holy Yamuna.

Hailed as a master builder by the Guinness World Records, Swamiji has been awarded another record, for constructing 355 mandirs in 11 countries from January 1971 to January 2000.

Shikharbaddh mandirs are under way in Toronto, Chicago, Houston and Atlanta.

# Introduction

Every culture in the world has its own set of traditions. Even people living in forests, Red Indians, Africans, Eskimos all have their own belief systems. There are also beliefs of : Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Shinto, Tao and Confucianism.

Judaism observes rituals which include : circumcision, wearing of a skull - cap, dietary law known as *Kashrut*, not working after sunset, not travelling on Fridays and compulsory study of Hebrew. Traditions relating to worship include lighting of candles in the evening, observing the Sabbath and visiting the synagogue where men and women are seated separately.

Islam strictly observes traditions such as circumcision, wearing women a facial black veil, five prayers during the day, washing the face, hands and feet before praying, spreading a mat (in a specially prescribed manner) on the floor before praying, wearing a special cap on the head, undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca and circumambulating the “Ka’ba”.

In Christianity, the young, after being baptized, are bathed with water. In some churches, bread and wine are offered to the congregation after the prayer.

The Parsees perform “naujot” on the young, equivalent to baptism in Christianity.

Similarly, many other ethnics and communities have their own rites and rituals.

Of all world religions, the Hindu Dharma has the greatest array of rituals. The reasons for these are two fold : (i) It is the most ancient and (ii) it is a way of life and a religion. The two are inextricably interwoven. It is not possible to isolate one from the other. This shows the depth and richness of the Hindu Culture.

Age old customs in the Hindu Dharma, which until today were looked upon as blind faith, are now receiving modern

scientific support. Now we realize that even though the ancient shastras may not always have divulged reasons for the customs and rituals, they definitely did have a firm grounding that was not only beneficial to man's earthly life, but to his afterlife as well. For instance, Hindus believe that child education starts during life in the womb. We are familiar with the story of Prahlad, who received religious instruction while in his mother's womb. Shukdevji also gained knowledge in the womb, listening to sage Narad talking to his mother. Abhimanyu, son of Arjun, while in Subhadra's womb, learnt the secret of penetrating six of the seven strongholds (*Koṭhas*) of the Kaurav camp. He obtained this by listening to Shri Krishna talking to Subhadra. At one time, these occurrences sounded far-fetched. However today, research in embryology confirms this.

Yet some undesirable rituals and customs prevailed, such as animal sacrifices and Sati until the 19th century. During the first quarter of that century, Bhagwan Swaminarayan successfully eradicated these evils from Gujarat. Other rituals of Dharma which He established were Bhakti-based - of worshipping God with form - *Sakar Upasana*. This school of thought advocated worship to God through *Bhakti*-the path of love. The Swaminarayan Sampradaya is a Bhakti Sampradaya.

The *Shandilya Bhakti Sutras* define Bhakti as:

*Sa paramuraktiḥ bhaktiḥ Ishvare.*

i.e. Bhakti means offering love to God.

In His code of precepts known as the *Shikshapatri*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has also similarly defined Bhakti :

*Mahatmyajnananyugbhuri sneho bhaktischa Madhave.* (Verse 103)

i.e. intense devotion to God with a fully developed awareness of His glory constitutes Bhakti.

Of all endeavours to please God, the rishis proclaim Bhakti as the greatest :

*Bhaktya tushyati kevalam na tu gunaiḥ.*

i.e. God is pleased by only Bhakti, not by our worldly virtues (of Maya). The rituals and injunctions in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya are bhakti-centred; the aspirant (bhakta) offering love to God.

Yet unalloyed love for God manifests only when the bhakta overcomes the fetters of the physical body. Man foremost loves his body more than anything else. His life and daily activities are therefore primarily body-centred, to nourish and pamper it. Only by disengaging himself from this self-centredness can he evoke his inner sentiments (*bhavnas*) of love. For this, the proponents of Bhakti enjoined rites and rituals of Bhakti. They are a means to achieving an end, God-realization. In essence then, the sentiments inherent in these rituals are of love towards God and realising His glory.

To the novice aspirant, these rituals may seem superfluous; fulfilling nothing. The typical Western psyche bent on logic and rationality then induce doubts in him. “Why this? Why that?” To reconcile this, consider a corollary in our worldly living. When we first play a game of sports, we do not enjoy it, as would a veteran. Unfamiliar with the rules, we make mistakes. We flounder. We are downhearted. Yet we sincerely observe, accept and respect the rules of the game whether we understand them or not. We keep practising with faith. We alter our mental approach. We refine our physical techniques. Gradually we learn the subtle strategies. It is then that we begin to enjoy and savour the sport. We experience aesthetic fulfillment.

Similarly, the bhakti rituals and injunctions are first practised at body-level consciousness. Those involving fasts and diet purify the body and subsequently the mind. A few, such as *puja*, *katha* and mantra chanting, affect all three - body, mind and soul. We may not initially comprehend their significance nor their nuances. Yet the shastras and the Guru command us to keep practising with faith. We try to hone the practices to

perfection. There comes a time when each practice becomes second nature, a reflex.

Now the onus of the aspirant is to continue past this point. He involves the mind to evoke love (*bhavnas*) for God. Then comes the third stage, when the aspirant transcends the mind to attain Atma-realization. He dissociates himself from his three bodies - gross, subtle and causal. The baser instincts of anger, lust, greed, hate and others no longer pain him. He believes himself to be Atma - as *Aksbar*. By this mode of performing bhakti rituals, the aspirant transcends to the final stage, God-realization. Having become *Aksbar-rup*, the *mukta* (released soul) as he is now known, is able to offer unalloyed love (*bbakti*) to God.

Finally, a word about western modes of living and thinking which constantly encroach the lives of Hindus worldwide. It is easy to emulate western rituals which basically have little or no religious significance. For instance, the cutting of a red ribbon during the opening of a new building, blowing out lighted candles on a cake and then cutting it ceremoniously. On such occasions, we are guided by the Guru, who is the custodian of the Hindu Dharma. Pramukh Swami Maharaj advocates Bhagwan's puja, untying the sacred *nada-chhadi* at the doorway, and cracking a coconut rather than cutting a ribbon. He advocates kindling a sacred *divo*, rather than snuffing out lighted candles. The underlying symbolism here is of *ahimsa* and enlightenment. The Hindu Dharma enlightens rather than 'cuts' the *Jiva*.

For Hindus then, changing technology and western influence will inevitably hammer our lifestyles. At such times, the *Satpurush*, who is the living embodiment of Dharma, guides us in interpreting and observing existing rituals. If necessary he may amend or add to them to sustain the Hindu Dharma.

For instance, a bone of contention in recent years is the

moral fuzziness created by the use of internet, cell phones, violent video games and virtual reality gadgets. Fully aware of the benefits, Pramukh Swami Maharaj is far more perturbed by their detrimental effect on the character of the young. Therefore, in the summer of 2000, he advised them to avoid using them altogether. If curricular work obligates internet's use, then he advocates students to observe great *vivek* - discretion. Ditto for cell phones. To young people who tote them solely as a status symbol and extravagance, he urges them to avoid their use. Additionally, he has enjoined all owners not to use them while driving. In the mandir, at least in *katha* and while doing *darshan*, he considers it *bhakti*, *vivek* and humble decorum to switch them off. On 15th February 2001, he even enjoined devotees not to bring them to the mandir !

During the Navaratri festival it is customary for females to observe forms of fasting, *puja* and *Garba* - folk dancing, to please Bhagwan's *Shakti-Mataji*. Towards this end, Pramukh Swami Maharaj stresses that traditional decorum be strictly observed, by celebrating within the female wing. Nor should they resort to non-traditional styles of dancing such as 'disco-Garba' as has insidiously become vogue. To young men who wish to celebrate it, he enjoins them to do so separately.

Similarly, Pramukh Swami Maharaj exhorts all Hindus to celebrate the Hindu New Year on Kartik sud 1, rather than the new year of the Gregorian calendar on 1st January.

– Authors

# 1. Puja

(Worship)

- What is Puja? Why do we perform Puja?
- Why do we perform Parmatma's Puja?
- Why is there a need for a Murti?
- Why is the Guru's Murti Puja performed?
- Who is a Guru? What is the need for a Guru ? How does one revere the Guru?
- What is the Pujavidhi?
- Puja Dravya
- Types of Prasad (Naivedya) usually offered.
- Puja in other common situations.

## (1) What is Puja? Why do we perform Puja?

The word *Puja* is derived from the Sanskrit root *Puj*, meaning, to worship, to adore. *Puja* is the act of worshipping, encompassing a host of feelings such as faith, humility, veneration, surrenderance and thanksgiving. *Puja* is a meeting with God.

In fact, we all do *Puja* whether we are theist or atheist, rich or poor, learned or ignorant. Some do *Puja* of living beings, some of inanimate objects.

If someone rescued us from drowning, would we not wholeheartedly thank him? Wouldn't we adore the dog who awakens us when thieves try to break into our house?

After the heroic efforts of the famous horse, Chetak, who saved Rana Pratap from Akhbar's offensive in Haldighati, Rana Pratap hugged Chetak. Was that not a show of gratitude and adoration? In everyday life one commonly sees various forms of veneration; the craftsman revering his tools, the racing driver kissing his car or the sportsman kissing his bat or racket.

To offer gratitude to something or someone who may have helped us in some way is *Puja* in its simplest form.

## (2) Why do we perform Parmatma's Puja?

If we are thankful to an inanimate object or an animal or a person who has been helpful to us in some way, are we not indebted to the sun on which we depend for life? Similarly, the moon also affects life on Earth. Water itself is life giving. And despite modern technology, where would we be without rain? Then, shouldn't we respect these occurrences of nature? They in turn are created and sustained by God. Does not God then deserve our veneration? We all respect and revere God. That is *Puja*. We cannot afford to remain ungrateful towards the One who has graced us in so many ways.

We do *Parmatma's Puja* to show our reverence for His infinite grace. *Puja* teaches us how to love Him. It lightens the load of His debt on us. *Puja* develops virtues. *Puja* gives life. *Puja* brings about fulfilment.

## (3) Why is there a need for a murti?

A teenager had stuck a poster of his favourite cricketer in his room. Asked why, he replied "I admire him! I want to play like him. I get inspiration from this poster."

Call it a poster, a painting or a *murti* (idol), it inspires love, respect and goal direction in a man's heart. These virtues are kindled by the *murti*.

In the epic Mahabharat, Eklavya became the supreme archer, guided and inspired solely by his Guru's *murti*.

## (7) Why is the Guru's Murti Puja performed?

In life we come across statues, portraits and photographs of leaders and other famous people, who have achieved excellence in their respective fields. We are inspired by them and many choose to follow their footsteps in pursuit of success. However this excellence of the leaders is only limited to their particular field. It is commonly observed that their lives are invariably steeped in the dualities of love and hate, happiness and misery.

As such what is the good in looking up to them for inspiration? The true ideal is to succeed in life, to attain the *Stbitapragna*, or *Gunatit* state or God- realisation. Such inspiration can only be obtained from a true Guru - the *Satpurush*.

The Guru's *murti puja* plays a fundamental role in cultivating the redemptive attributes in the disciple.

### (8) Who is a Guru? What is the need for a Guru? How does one revere the Guru?

A "Guru" in simple terms means a teacher. Anyone from whom we learn something is a guru. The teachers and lecturers in school or college can also be called gurus, though the word *Acharya* is more appropriately assigned to them. The word Guru is specifically reserved for a spiritual master.

In Sanskrit, the root *gu* means ignorance or darkness and *ru* means knowledge or light. So one who leads the aspirant from darkness to enlightenment is a Guru.

In the Hindu Dharma, great importance is attached to the Guru. Every aspirant needs a Guru for guidance on the spiritual path. By his own efforts, the aspirant cannot hope to progress far. The shastras advise :

*Tad vighnanartham sa Gurumewabhighachhet  
samit panibi Shrotriyam Brahmanisbtham.*

(Mundaka Upanishad 1-2-12)

i.e. To know the Reality, he (the aspirant) should go with gifts to a Guru who is well versed in the Vedas and one who has realised *Brahman*.

This Guru should be revered, in fact worshipped like God :

*Yasya deve para bhaktihi, yatha deve tatha gurau,  
Tasyaite kathita hi arthaha, prakashante mahatmanaha.*

(Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6/23)

i.e. As one offers devotion to the Deity, one should offer devotion to the Guru. So decree the wise sages. Therein one

will obtain everything there is to obtain.

In Vach. Vartal 5, Bhagwan Swaminarayan asserts :

“One who offers equal and intensely loving service to God, and His choicest *Sadhu*, then despite being a most mediocre devotee who is destined to become a great devotee after either two births, four births, ten births or even a hundred births, he can become a great devotee in this very birth. Such is the fruit of equally serving God and His choicest Devotee.”

### (9) What is the Pujavidhi?

*Puja* means to offer respect. *Pujavidhi* is the means by which one offers respect. Just as people who are brought up in different cultures have their own ways of offering respect, similarly there are different ways of offering *puja*. Over time, these traditional methods of veneration have been woven into the fabric of the culture.

In the military, a high ranking officer is offered a salute with the hand whilst standing in the “Attention” position. This has become a ritual, a *vidhi*.

In England, on special occasions the Queen is honoured by laying out a red carpet for her to walk on. This is a form of *puja*.

Smashing a champagne bottle during the launching of a newly built ship, cake-cutting and blowing out lighted candles in the Western tradition, are all forms of *puja*.

Any ritual of veneration which has become a tradition is *puja*.

In India, various forms of *puja* are practised. For example, the shastras have given an injunction, *Atithi devo bhava* i.e. to treat a visitor like a deity. So if a visitor arrives at the doorstep, without any previous notification, he is to be welcomed like a deity.

In ancient times, the *atithi* was initially welcomed with sweet sentiments. Then he was proffered cool water for washing and to quench his thirst. This would be followed by food. If the person seemed to be worthy of greater veneration, *kum-kum* powder and a few rice-grains would be applied on his forehead. He

would then be garlanded, given good clothes, and according to contemporary custom, would also be offered rich gifts, such as milk, ghee and grains. The host would then recite Sanskrit (the commonly spoken language then) verses to convey his warm-hearted sentiments for the guest. In this way, a coalescence of sentiments and actions were imparted. This was the precursor of *Panchopchar* (five ways of performing *puja*), *Dashopchar* (ten ways) and *Shodshopchar* (sixteen ways) *pujavidhi*. The type chosen depended on the importance of the guest.

*Shodshopchar vidhi* was more commonly practised and its sixteen steps are as follows :

1. *Abawan* - invitation, invocation.
2. *Asan* - offering a seating arrangement e.g. mat, cushion, etc.
3. *Padya* - cleaning the feet with water.
4. *Ergya* - applying *chandlo* and rice on the forehead.
5. *Achman* - offering drinking water.
6. *Snan* - bathing him with water.
7. *Vastra* - offering rich garments.
8. *Upavit* - offering the sacred thread called *janoi*.
9. *Gandha* - sprinkling perfume.
10. *Dhoopa* - using incense sticks to make the air fragrant.
11. *Deepa* - illuminating the area by lighting a *divo* (cotton wick immersed in ghee).
12. *Naivedya* - offering rich foods and sweets.
13. *Arti* - waving *divas* in a circular motion.
14. *Pradakshina* - circumambulating the person or *murti*.
15. *Pushpanjali* - offering flowers and garlands.
16. *Rajopchar* - offering an umbrella, wisp, wooden footwear (*Paduka*) and other similar items; and then please God or person by melodiously singing and playing musical instruments.

Today, to a lesser or greater extent, in one form or another, we still follow the above practice to welcome guests. Only the

names of the *vidhis* have changed.

If we welcome home an ordinary guest, then would a *bhakta* be restrained from showering his love, when a divine personage like *Parmatma* Himself graces his home? So with the aid of Shodshopchar and recitation of Sanskrit verses, *Parmatma* is venerated and it is this ancient Hindu tradition which is termed *Pujavidhi*.

**(10) Puja Dravya - Auspicious materials used to perform puja are listed below :**

1. Types of leaves : Banana, Tulsi, *Betel* Vine, Asopalav, Bilva (Bili), Peepal and Mango.
2. Pulses : Wheat, Rice, Mungbeans.
3. For *Archan* (imprinting) *Kum-Kum* (red) powder, *Abil* (white powder), *Gulal* (pink powder), *Chandan* (Sandalwood paste).
4. Cloth for *Asan* : Red and white are considered auspicious. Sometimes yellow is also used. Black is never used in any sacred Hindu ritual because it is considered inauspicious.
5. Coconuts (Shrifal) and Betelnuts (*Sopari* or *Poogifalam*).
6. *Nada Chhadi* (red string) to be tied on the right wrist of the person involved in the ritual.
7. *Kalash* (Copper vessel for holding sanctified water and the coconut).
8. Flowers.
9. *Dhoopa* (Incense sticks).
10. *Deepa* (*Divo*) - lighted wick using ghee - clarified butter.
11. *Arti*.
12. *Ghanta* or small bell with a handle, to be rung every so often during the *vidhi*.
13. *Panchamrut* - mixture of five substances for bathing the *murti* - milk, honey, yogurt, ghee and sugar.

**(11) Types of Prasad (*Naivedya*) usually offered. For some**

ceremonies, the type of prasad to be offered is common:

1. Jaggery and coriander seeds (*dhana*) - most commonly offered in any *pujavidhi*.
2. *Shiro* - a sweet cooked using wheat flour, sugar and milk with cardamom and saffron for flavouring. Usually offered after a discourse (*Katha*) e.g. *Satyanarayan Katha*.
3. *Penda* - a sweet made from milk solids and sugar.
4. *Panchamrut* - Ref. No. 13 above.
5. *Panchajiri* - Mixture of ginger, suwa, coriander, ghee & sugar.
6. Dry fruits, fresh fruits.
7. Coconut chips sprinkled with sugar.
8. Groundnuts and large sugar crystals called *sakar*.
9. Groundnuts coated with sugar candy.
10. Parched rice (*pauwa*) soaked in milk with sugar (*Dudha pauwa*) offered especially on Sharad Punam.
11. *Mukhwās* - chewing a special mixture of spices and herbs - to cleanse the mouth, which also act as a digestive aid, somewhat similar to eating "After-dinner mints" in the West. This mixture usually consists of : cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, betel nut chips fennel (*variyaali*), coriander *dal* and sesame seeds.

## (12) Puja in other ceremonies.

In the Hindu Dharma, *Pujan* (*pujavidhi*) is performed of a new object before using it, such as a house, a car, a refrigerator, a camera, and so on, etc. The *Pujan* can be performed either by chanting a few mantras, or a full-fledged *vidhi* called *Mahapuja*, which can span up to one and a half hours.

*Pujan* is also performed during ground-breaking to sanctify the area. On entering a new building, *Pujan* is done on the doorway. Then a coconut is smashed on the ground, rather than cutting a red ribbon, a ritual encouraged by Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

the statue of Mary with the child Jesus? They are all symbolic representations and *murtis* of the Divine, and are revered and worshipped as such. Protestants even have a painting of Christ and wear a cross. Many Muslims pray at the tombs of their saints. The Bible and Koran are regarded literally as the word of God. This is worship of objects (Frawley 2003: 100). Over the centuries, the erosion of St. Peter's toes in the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, due to repeated touching by visitors overwhelmed and inspired by the statue is testimony to *murti puja*.

The heart of believers will only feel contented and fulfilled if some tangible form is present before them. Meditating on or worshipping something invisible or subtle like blank space is not conducive to man's inner feelings and yearnings. Man's mind is unable to grasp something intangible. He is unable to visualise or pray to the Almighty in his imagination, on nothingness. Those who try, fail. This is precisely the injunction of the *Gita* (12/5):

*Kaleshodbhikataraha tesham avyaktasaktachetasam,  
Avyakta hi gatirdukkham dehawadbhihi awapyate.*

i.e. One who tries to concentrate his mind on the formless experiences great misery and pain.

An argument often put forward, about how an omnipresent and omnipotent God be confined in the limited space of a *murti*, is but naive. For if these people do really believe God to be omnipresent, then how can He NOT be present in a *murti* and be present everywhere else?

In a similar manner, if adept yogis or *siddhas* are able to perform *par kaya pravesha* - ability to enter the bodies and minds of other people, and if such lowly and evil phenomena like ghosts and spirits have the capacity to possess people, can the omnipotent God not be able to enter a *murti*, especially if He is invoked by sacred Vedic *mantras*?

The *Gunatit Sadhu* - the true *Sadhu* of God, also has the

ability, due to his spiritual purity and greatness to invoke God in a *murti*, as revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Vachanamrut Gadhada I-68.

Lastly, if earthly (*mayic*) substances can radiate radioactivity, then can God not emanate divinity through a *murti*?

In India, people convey their respect to a *murti* by lighting a *divo* and garlanding the *murti*, and then touching its feet in deep veneration.

*Murti Puja* is our veneration to the Divine through a *murti*. This inspires divine virtues in us.

### **Parmatma's Murti Puja**

We are obliged to *Parmatma* for many reasons. Therefore to offer our gratitude and respect, we become eager to do His *puja*. Since He is omnipresent, how do we offer *puja*? We do this in the same manner as we offer respects to our favourite star or statesman - by respecting his photograph or statue.

If one is inspired by the statue of a worldly figure, then surely one can also be inspired by *Parmatma's murti*? This develops attributes like benevolence, love, purity, truth and non-violence in our hearts. Forgetting *Parmatma's* infinite dues on us, we become egocentric. To prevent this, it behoves upon us to remain humble and vigilant. In order to kindle *Parmatma's* divine attributes in us, we perform His *murti puja*.

In the Sanatan Dharma, there is only one creator of the infinite cosmos, who is supreme, the all- doer, eternally divine, and eternally with (human) form. There are infinite *jivas* (Souls) all bound by the ignorance of *maya*. For *mukti* - redemption from *maya*, the *jivas* best and only way is to accept surrenderance at the feet of *Parmatma*, and to then serve and offer humble devotion to Him. The devotee can never become God. *Bhakti* (devotion) remains the status quo before and after *moksh*. In other words, *bhakti* becomes the means and the goal.

This devotion and service is amenable only if *Parmatma* is manifesting (*Pratyaksh*) on Earth. The all-merciful *Parmatma*, for the benevolence of His *bhaktas* (devotees) does incarnate on Earth. During this period, the *bhaktas* get a chance to offer devotion, but what happens when He physically leaves this world? He then manifests Himself through His *murti*. This *murti* is not a symbol. It is to be revered as *Parmatma* Himself. The Vedas proclaim *Parmatma's* form to be beyond mind and speech. To facilitate *bhakti*, *Parmatma* assumes the form of a *murti*. By focusing the mind and senses in His devotion, worldly desires are easily subdued. In focusing the *chitt* (mind) onto *Parmatma*, the *pran* - life-force is also controlled and one attains the state of *Nirvikalp samadhi* - the highest state of realisation by the *jiva*.

The uniqueness of *Parmatma's murti puja* is that, through this medium, the *bhakta* experiences the bliss resulting from serving Him. Once the mind stills in Him, the *bhakta* is liberated from the vitiating influences of his baser instincts.

The rites and mantras during *pran pratishtha* include : *shodash samskar, pranshakte prarthna, Gayatri mantra paath, netronmilinam, adarshnivedanam, murti pujan, prarthna, Ganpati pujan, Hanuman pujan, Naivedyam, uttaraposhanam, nirajanam, mantrapushpanjali, prarthna ksbamapanam sampurnata-vachanam, utsarjan samkalpaha, ashirvad, pitbasthdevanam visarjanam, tirthgrahanam.*

**In Box -----** “An image of Krishna as the good cowherd is on par with that of Christ as the good shepherd. To make one into a superstitious idol and the other into a sacred image is hypocritical and intolerant. It is like saying that only spices used in American cooking are legitimate spices, while those used in Indian cooking are food adulterants!”

David Frawley, *Hinduism : The Eternal Tradition* (2003:100)

## 2. Nitya Puja-I

(Daily Worship)

- What is Nitya-Puja?
- Why is Nitya-Puja performed in the morning?
- The necessity of a personal Nitya-Puja.
- What murtis should one worship in the Nitya-Puja?
- The sequence of the Nitya-Puja routine.
- Nitya-Puja in light of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings.
- Personal Nitya-Puja and puja of the Ghar Mandir.
- Nitya-Puja in illness and old age .
- How is the purity of puja maintained?
- The daily deed to be performed immediately after Nitya-Puja.
- The benefits of Nitya-Puja.
- HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj's remarks about Nitya-Puja.

### (1) What is Nitya-Puja?

*Nitya* means daily. *Puja* in Sanskrit means to adore, to worship. *Puja* is to worship God. Therefore *Parmatma's Puja* performed every day is known as *Nitya-Puja*. If someone save us from drowning, then we would still remember him on special occasions, such as his birthday or Diwali. That is a subtle act of *puja*. But gradually we tend to forget favours and obligations. A favour is to be remembered and returned, whilst an ill act on oneself by someone should be forgotten. By remembering a favour, man becomes humble, for he realises that his life depends on the help of others. Therefore he is also inspired to help others.

*Parmatma's* blessings on us are countless. We are greatly indebted to Him. Simultaneously, the Guru's obligations on us are also unrepayable, for he shows us the true paths and continually infuses strength to walk that path. Over a period of time we tend to forget the debt of *Parmatma* and the Guru, and this retards our spiritual ascent. To prevent this, it behoves

upon us to be ever vigilant. The daily performance of *puja* of the *murti* or portrait of *Parmatma* and the Guru is *Nitya-Puja*. It is a blissful encounter, a meeting with God and Guru. In comparison to their profound grace on us, *Nitya-Puja* is our way of returning love and gratitude, no matter how petty and insignificant.

*Nitya-Puja* evokes feelings of love and adoration. On occasions it may feel mechanical or robotic. If a wick and ghee are present then someday a light will be kindled. Yet how can we demand a light when we have got rid of the wick?

## (2) Why is Nitya-Puja performed in the morning?

The shastras declare that the early hours of the morning are considered especially auspicious. Therefore any sacred activity performed in the morning will bear greater fruit. If we recall an ignominious character such as Ravana in the morning, then we will be influenced by evil desires, of hate and jealousy, of gaining power and wealth and becoming egoistic. On the other hand, meditating on God and the *Gunatit Sadhu* will awaken our spiritual attributes of *Dharma*, *Jnan*, *Vairagya* and *Bhakti*. The heart will be suffused with redemptive attributes such as: benevolence, mercy, love, tolerance, forgiveness, generosity. Then one experiences peace.

The *Manu Smruti* (8-12), reveals :

*Brahme muburte ya nidra sa poonyakshayakarini.*

i.e. The sleep during *brahme muburt* (48 to 96 minutes before sunrise) destroys our *punya* - spiritual merit. What progress can a man make if he is lethargic right from morning ?

There is no better auspicious time for *puja* than early morning. After a night's rest, the mind is more peaceful than at any other time of the day. This augments concentration on *Parmatma*. *Mantra* chanting is also implemented resolutely. With a peaceful mind, thoughts of the Divine still the mind further

and make it purer. The inspirations from God and His *Sadhu*, and the goal of life can both be contemplated upon with greater clarity. In turn, the day's activities are performed with this same awareness. With such awareness, they become devotional and the day passes blissfully, in peace. In fact the day becomes a festival. To transform the day's chores into *bhakti*, into a festival, to keep it free of misfortunes, the morning *puja* is a must and a boon. We are better able to get through the day's vexing problems at work and home. We remain spiritually charged and therefore less stressed.

### (3) The necessity of a personal Nitya-Puja.

Some people reveal naively that one of their family members performs the *puja* and lights a *divo* in the *Ghar mandir*, so the rest have no need to do *puja* themselves!

To this rationale, Pramukh Swami Maharaj says :

*“When we feel hungry, if someone else eats on our behalf, will that satisfy us? When we are thirsty, if someone else drinks water, will it quench our thirst? If we feel sleepy, and if somebody else sleeps for us, will we be rested? Only we can do those things for ourselves. No one can do them for us. Similarly, everyone should do their own puja. By doing puja ourselves, it is we who get to serve God and it is we who reap the benefits. It is the person who does the puja who is strengthened, inspired and whose baser instincts are removed. For personal development and a personal session with God, a personal puja is performed.”*

### (4) What murtis should one worship in the Nitya-Puja?

There is only one creator, sustainer and protector of the infinite universes and that is *Parmatma - Purushottam Narayan*. For the *bhakta*, all incarnations are included in this form. In the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya*, the form of worship (*Upasana*)

advocated is of God with His choicest *bhakta*, the *Gunatit Sadhu*. Therefore in the *Nitya-Puja*, the *murtis* to be worshipped are of Akshar Purushottam and the *Gunatit Sadhu*.

The *murtis* should be of the whole figure. A portrait (just the face) is not suitable. Worn-out or old *murtis* should be replaced. There should be only one *murti* each of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and of the *Gunatit parampara*. Duplicates of different styles are unnecessary.

## (5) The sequence of the Nitya-Puja routine.

Devotees of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan (BAPS) sanstha follow the *Nitya-Puja vidhi* described below : The reasons and *bhavna* behind each procedure are dealt with in the next chapter.

### 1. The ideal time for *puja* :

Ideally, one should wake up before sunrise and have a bath or shower. In countries where the timings of sunrise fluctuate - between the summer and winter months, an ideal time would be before 6.00 a.m. - a time advocated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj for those living outside India. The young, aged or ill are exempted. But doing *puja* late in the morning, or afternoon or evening, solely due to a bad habit of waking up late does not confirm to the scriptural injunctions.

### 2. Clothing :

- The clothes worn during *puja* should be washed and preferably kept separate from those worn during the day. For males, a *dbotiyu* or *lengho* and a *gatariyu* or *jabho* are suitable. After *puja*, both should be neatly folded and stored away. This is the *sattvic* and traditional Vedic attire handed to us by the rishis and *sadhus*. It also inspires righteous thoughts during *puja*.

- It is best not to wear a shirt and a pair of trousers, shorts or jeans during such an auspicious Hindu ritual.
- It is quite out of keeping with Hindu religious etiquette to wear a bath towel or pyjamas or *loongi* during *puja*! When we meet a dignitary we obviously wear decent and presentable clothes. *Nitya-Puja* is our personal appointment with *Parmatma*. Therefore we should also cultivate appropriate etiquette. Talking and fidgeting during *puja* should be avoided.

### 3. Place :

If possible, a silent environment is preferable. *Kirtan* cassettes playing in the background may boost *puja*.

### 4. *Asan* :

- An *asan* - a piece of cloth or mat, should be laid on the floor for one to sit on. One should face either east or north. In the Hindu Dharma, these two directions are considered auspicious. (ref. Ch. 3, No. 1)
- Next, in front of our *asan*, another *asan* should be laid for the *murtis*. The *Shikshapatri* and the *tilak-chandlo* paraphernalia should be placed neatly on one side.

### 5. *Tilak-chandlo* :

The male *bhaktas* :

- First the *tilak* should be imprinted on the forehead using sandalwood paste.
- Then, in the middle of the *tilak*, a round *kum-kum* (red) *chandlo* should be imprinted. The *kum-kum* should preferably not be of sandalwood paste, unless one is allergic to the *kum-kum* powder.
- Using sandalwood paste, a *tilak* and *chandlo* should be imprinted on both the upper arms and in the middle of the

chest. (ref. Ch. 3, No. 2)

As for the female bhaktas Bhagwan Swaminarayan says in the *Shikshapatri* (verses 52, 53) :

- “Married women should imprint only a round *kum-kum* mark on their foreheads. Widows shall not put on *tilak* or the round *kumkum* mark.”
- Unmarried women also do not imprint any mark on their foreheads.

## 6. Meditation (*Dhyan*) :

- One should then sit for *Dhyan* in the yogic posture of *siddhasan* or *padmasan*. If this is not possible, one can sit in the normal cross-legged posture. One should also sit up, with a straight back (Gita 6/13-14). An erect spinal-cord promotes better blood flow to the brain.
- One then meditates on Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the *Gunatit Sadhu* -Pramukh Swami Maharaj, avoiding all worldly thoughts.
- To aid concentration, one can also perform the *Om* or the *bhramari pranayam* prior to meditation. The remarkable effects of *pranayam* on concentrating the mind have been verified by modern researchers.

## (6) What should one do during meditation?

### (1) *Atmachintan* :

To think about the *Atma* and one’s true identity, in the following way :

“I am *Atma*, separate from this material body (gross, subtle and causal). Shri Swaminarayan constantly resides in my *Atma*. Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the embodiment of *Akshar Brahman* is my *Atma*.”

### (2) Aim of life :

One should internally vocalise the goal of one’s life :

- “Under any circumstance and at any cost, I want to please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj only.”
- “By becoming *Aksbar-rup* (like *Aksbar*) I want to serve *Purusottam*” (*Shikshapatri* verse 116).

### (3) *Mansi Puja* :

- In *Mansi Puja* (mental visualisation) one can perform the *shodshopchar puja* of *Parmatma* and the Guru. One should try to evoke deep feelings of love and adoration from the heart during this form of meditation.

### 7. Arrangement of murtis :

- After meditation, one should lay out the *murtis* on the separate *asan*, as shown opposite:
- This is followed by reciting the *abhawan mantra* - praying to God to grace the *puja* :

*Uttish-shibho-tishtha hey Nath! Swaminarayan  
Prabho!*

*Dharmasuno dayasindho swesham sbreyaha param  
kuru*

*agachha Bhagwan deva, swasthanat Parameshwara,  
Aham pujam karishyami sada twam sanmukho bhava.*

i.e. “O Son of *Dharma*! O ocean of mercy! O *Nath*! O *Swaminarayan*! O *Prabhu*! Please arise and redeem Your devotees. O *Parmeshwar*! O *Deva*! O *Bhagwan*! Please come and grace my *puja* from Your throne in *Akshardham*. Please be seated in front of me. I wish to perform Your *puja*.”

### 8. Mala (Rosary) and Mantra chanting:

- By doing the *darshan* of the *murtis* and keeping the mind focused on them, one should turn the *mala*, chanting the “Swaminarayan” *mantra* for every bead.
- One can perform five, eleven or more *malas*, according to one’s devotional fervour.

## 9. Tapa Mala :

This procedure is only performed by the male *bhaktas*.

- One should then stand up on one leg and with both hands raised high turn one *mala*.
- Whilst doing this *tapa mala*, one should visualise Neelkanth Varni - Bhagwan Swaminarayan performing austerities in Muktinath, in the Himalayas. Through this, one is made aware, inspired and given strength to tolerate any hardships on the path of God-realisation.

## 10. Pradakshina (Circumambulation):

Then one performs *Pradakshina* of the *murtis*, whilst continuing to do the *mala*. This involves walking clockwise around the *murtis*. Walking once around the *murtis* amounts to one *Pradakshina*. The standard is to do five or eleven. More *Pradakshinas* can be done according to one's convenience.

## 11. Sashtang Dandvat Pranam (Prostration):

*Sashtang* means 'with eight parts of the body'. *Danda* means 'a stick' and *vat* means 'like', 'similar'. So a *dandvat* is a position similar to a stick lying on the floor. In doing *Sashtang dandvat pranam*, one lies down flat, on the stomach, with hands outstretched in front of the body. (ref. Ch. 3. No. 20) Six of these *dandvats* should be performed after *Pradakshina*. The sixth is to atone for, knowingly or unknowingly hurting a *bhakta* by mind, speech or physically during the previous day's activities. This sixth *dandvat* has been advocated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Vach. Gadhada II. 40.

## 12. Offering Thal in Mansi :

After the *Dandvat Pranams*, one re-sits in the *Puja* and offers *Thal* (*Naivedya*) in *Mansi*. This means offering food to God, visualising the food dishes that one personally relishes. Both palms

should face upwards. One imagines holding a large decorative tray in front of the *murtis* containing exotic food dishes.

### 13. Prayer

After *Mansi*, one should pray wholeheartedly with hands joined in *Pranam* :

*O Maharaj ! O Swami !* Please protect us from the *maya* of “I” and “mine”. Please protect us from our *indriyas* and *antabkaran.*” Please protect us from all types of *Kusang* - evil company. Please inspire us so we can develop firm *Atmabuddhi* with You.”

Finally one touches the *charans* (lotus-feet) of the *murtis* and brings one’s hands to one’s eyes. This is known as *charan sparsh.*

### 14. Visarjan (Farewell):

- The *puja* ends by expressing thankful sentiments to Maharaj and the *Gunatit Sadhus* for gracing it:

*Swasthanam gachha devesha pujamadaya mamakim,  
Ishtakam-prasiddhyartham punaragamanaya cha.*

i.e. “O Lord of the Deities! Fulfilling my wishes for success in my day’s activities, You have blessed my *puja*. Please resume Your seat in the altar of my heart and return tomorrow to re-grace my *puja*.”

### 15. Reading the Shikshapatri :

- One should diligently read the *Shikshapatri* according to Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s injunctions.
- One should read a minimum of five verses and think over them, aiming to imbibe them in one’s life.

### (6) Nitya-Puja in light of Shri Swaminarayan’s teachings.

The *Gita* (18/54) proclaims:

*Brahmabhootaha prasannatma na shochati na kankshati,  
Samaha sarveshu bhuteshu madbhaktim labhate param.*

i.e. One who becomes *Brahmarup*, becomes eligible to offer devotion to Me.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan asserts a similar injunction :

*Nijatmanam brahmarupam dehatraya vilakshanam,  
vibhavyatena kartavya bhaktihi krishnasya sarvada.*

(Shikshapatri 116)

i.e. One should identify one's *Atma* with *Brahman*, then by becoming *Brahmarup*, one can worship *Purushottam Narayan*.

In order to realise the above injunction i.e. to become eligible to worship *Purushottam* and attain His *krupa* - grace, the *bhakta* has to attain purity in mind and body. This purity can only be achieved by becoming an *Ekantik bhakta*. An *Ekantik bhakta* is one who has totally imbibed all four pillars of *Ekantik Dharma* - *Dharma, Jnan, Vairagya* and *Bhakti*.

By doing *Puja* everyday, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has given us an opportunity to realise *Ekantik Dharma*. The *Nitya-Puja* consolidates all the four factors of *Ekantik Dharma* in the following ways:

- i) *Dharma* (Religious Duties) - in reading and imbibing the codes of the *Shikshapatri*.
- ii) *Jnan* (Knowledge) - the awareness and consolidation of the goal during *Atmachintan* and the prayer at the end.
  - in doing *pradakshina* and *mantra japa*.
- iii) *Vairagya* (Detachment) - the control of the *indriyas* by doing *pranayam* and the *Tapa mala*.
- iv) *Bhakti* (Devotion) : - in doing *Mansi puja* when we offer love and devotion to *Parmatma* and in the prayer at the end when we ask for *bhakti* and forgiveness.

## (7) Personal Nitya-Puja and Puja of the Ghar Mandir.

We have already discussed *Nitya-Puja*. Details of the *Ghar mandir* will be considered in a later chapter (Ch.9). Both play an important role in the life of a *bhakta*. Offering worship in the

*Ghar mandir* does not replace *Nitya-Puja*. *Nitya-Puja* has to be performed in addition to the *bhakti* one offers in the *Ghar mandir*.

In the *Ghar mandir*, the collective endeavours and devotional feelings of the whole family are involved, whereas the *Nitya-Puja* is *bhakti* offered at the personal level. With the personal *puja*, the pictured *murti* of *Parmatma* can be taken by a *bhakta* wherever he goes. Therein the *Puja's* regularity is not disturbed. But without this *Nitya-Puja*, when one is away from home, its regularity will be disturbed, making one prone to laxity in observing one's *Dharma*.

Both the *Ghar mandir* and the *Nitya-Puja* are necessary and complement each other.

#### (8) *Nitya-Puja* in illness and old age.

When one is totally bedridden either due to severe illness or old age, when bathing is impractical, one should give one's *Puja* to another family member, who should perform the *Puja* on one's behalf. One can still do *mala*, *mantra japa* and read the *Shikshapatri*. But a minor illness such as a cold is not to be regarded as a dire circumstance and one should steadfastly endeavour to do *Nitya-Puja*.

#### (9) How is the purity of *Puja* maintained?

The *Puja* itself is considered sacred and as such should not be kept in a place where it might be touched by feet, shoes or house pets. It should also not be placed in the kitchen. Ideally the *Puja* should not be touched or opened again after the morning worship until the next day.

#### (10) The daily deed to be performed after *Nitya-Puja*.

After *Puja*, one should do *darshan* of the *Ghar mandir* and then do *panchang pranam* (ref. Ch. 3. No. 21) to one's parents. If they are not present, then one should offer *pranam* to their

photographs. To the other members of the family, one should do simple *pranam* and say “Jai Swaminarayan.”

### (11) The benefits of Nitya-Puja :

The last two decades have witnessed great strides in the search for relaxation techniques, whose needs have come about as a result of increasing stress in our lives. One of the most famous and practicable techniques has been Dr. Herbert Benson’s “Relaxation Response”, based on meditation. A cardiologist and associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, he stumbled across this form of meditation in 1985, in a Tibetan monastery, where monks used the technique to maintain their body temperatures in freezing conditions.

The simplified technique is outlined here for the reader to compare with *Nitya-Puja*. He suggests practising the technique once a day for 20 minutes to elicit the Relaxation Response.

Pick a focus word, a *mantra* or short phrase, e.g. “one” or “peace”. Sit quietly in a comfortable position. Close your eyes and relax your muscles.

Breathe slowly and naturally, and repeat the focus word as you exhale.

Assume a passive attitude. Do not worry about how well you are doing. Disregard distractions. Let the thoughts and images pass on. Return to repeating the focus word.

Continue for ten to twenty minutes once or twice daily.

When perfected this method brings about healthy changes in the body such as : a decrease in heart rate and blood pressure, a decrease in the rate of metabolism, decreased rate of breathing, increased blood flow to the brain by 25 per cent and the brain’s random cycles become even, called “alpha” waves, which are associated with a feeling of relaxation and well-being.

Although Benson primarily used this technique to combat stress on the mind and body, he showed that there were hidden

benefits more powerful than those of relieving stress. He says, “We found that the ‘Relaxation Response’ can enable you to change even the most deeply ingrained bad habits. It can enable you to develop new, beneficial disciplines and enhance your health in ways which you had always felt were beyond your grasp... By eliciting the ‘Relaxation Response’ through meditation or prayer you can set the stage for important mind and habit altering brain change.”

The bottom line is that this is astonishingly similar to *Nitya-Puja*. The only difference is that, in *Puja* we have *murtis* present before us and instead of visualising an abstract word like “one”, we vocalise the powerful “Swaminarayan” *mantra*. Therefore in addition to the health benefits, *Nitya-Puja* surpasses ‘Relaxation Response’, since the “God factor” is involved in *Nitya-Puja*. *Nitya-Puja* purifies the *Antahkaran* (mind) of *vasana* - lust, anger, greed, ego and jealousy. Such a purified mind is capable of achieving anything in the world, including the ultimate goal of life and the supreme spiritual benefit for the *Atma*— God realization.

### Nitya-Puja

*“We should bathe in the morning and then do mala and puja. Instead of shortening one’s bathing time, we tend to cut puja time. By shortening puja, only we are at a loss. We should never miss puja, and the tilak-chandlo should be applied properly.*

*“Some people complain that, “we do not get time”. But then, how do you get time to eat? If we cannot spare even fifteen minutes or half an hour for Him who has given us 24 hours, then there’s no one more ungrateful than us.”*

– Pramukh Swami Maharaj

## 3. Nitya-Puja-II

(Varied Aspects & Meanings)

- Why should one face North or East during Puja?
- What is the Tilak-Chandlo? Why do it on the forehead, arms and chest?
- The origins of Tilak-chandlo in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.
- The benefits of Tilak-chandlo.
- What is Mansi Puja?
- The benefits of Mansi Puja.
- What is a Mantra? Why chant mantras?
- The Swaminarayan mantra
- How should one chant a mantra?
- The benefits of mantra chanting.
- What is a mala?
- Why are there 108 beads in a mala?
- How to do a mala.
- The Sumeru of a mala.
- Why wear a mala round the neck?
- What is the Tapa mala?
- What is Pradakshina?
- What is Pranam?
- What is Dandvat Pranam?
- What is Sashtang Dandvat Pranam?
- What is Panchang Pranam?
- The benefits of Dandvat Pranam.
- What is Prayer?
- What factors can be included in Prayer?
- The things we should not pray for.
- The benefits of Prayer.
- Why should one read the Shikshapatri everyday ?
- If feelings are more important than the actual rituals themselves, then what is the need for performing such rituals?

## (1) Why should one face North or East during Puja?

One should face East for performing religious rituals such as *Puja* because the sun rises in the East. The rising sun invigorates our bodies and infuses divine attributes.

One faces north especially for religious studies because the school of all schools - the Himalayas lie to the north (for those living in India) It is itself a *Devatma*. The Goddess of learning, Saraswati also resides in the north.

In addition, for Hindus, the process of progressing upwards spiritually is known as *Uttar Path*. *Uttar* means north and *Path* means the way. Therefore to progress spiritually one faces northwards. The north is also a direction for stability, and one sits facing north to attain stability in life.

## (2) What is the Tilak - Chandlo? Why do it on the forehead, arms and chest?

In Indian culture, when a woman marries, in joy of getting a good husband - a guardian, she imprints a *chandlo* on her forehead.

In the *Bhakti* movements of the Hindu Dharma, God is the *Swami* (Guardian) of the *bhakta*. On being fortunate to have a guardian, the jubilant *bhakta* also imprints a *chandlo* on his forehead. The red *chandlo* is the auspicious (*saubhagya*) fortune sign of meeting God.

The head is the pride of an individual. An individual's personality lies in his thoughts and intellect. To show respect to others a man bows his head. To those whom he deeply reveres, he bows his head right down to their feet. The *bhakta*, surrenders his head - himself at the lotus feet of God.

So, a *bhakta* with loving feelings of sacrifice and surrender, symbolically imprints the "feet" (*charan*) of his *Swami* on :

- i) his forehead - so that God resides in his intellect for inspiring auspicious thoughts. The centre point of all nerves is the

place between the two eyebrows on the forehead. The rishis have therefore ordained for *tilak* to be done on this central area of the head to protect it.

- ii) his upper arms, symbols of strength - that God resides in them to inspire the *bhakta* to perform righteous acts.
- iii) his chest - site of the heart - symbolic of life, so that God resides in it to inspire noble feelings.

In this way, for thought, feelings and karma to become auspicious, the *tilak* is imprinted on these four parts of the body. The *tilak* is also imprinted in these four positions in *smruti* -remembrance of the four *Vyuba* forms of God, namely Vasudev, Sankarshan, Aniruddha and Pradyumna. (*Arthadeepika-Tika Bhashya*)

This is the *tilak* of the *Bhakti Sampradayas*. Each has its own way of doing *tilak*. The material used is also varied. Some make use of ash, some use red clay whilst many use sandalwood paste. In the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya*, the latter is used. Formerly the *chandlo* powder was made from lemon juice and turmeric powder. Today it is made from chemicals. But the natural form is also available for those whose skin is allergic to the artificial powder.

*Tilak-chandlo* is the fortune sign of having met God and of surrenderance to Him.

### (3) The origins of Tilak-chandlo in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

In Samvat 1877 (1821 C.E.) Bhagwan Swaminarayan celebrated the Fuldol festival in Panchala, a town near Junagadh in Saurashtra. The colour of the clay here was similar to that of sandalwood paste. He distributed clay tablets, each the size of a small chalk-stick, to the *sadhus* to use them to do *tilak* the next day. When He saw the varied shapes and imprints of the *tilak* He was amused and decided to show them the design He had

in mind. He summoned *Mul Aksbarmurti* Gunatitanand Swami, and imprinted the *tilak* on his forehead and a round *kumkum chandlo* in its centre. He then said, “This is our *Tilak*”. The *tilak* is a symbol for the lotus feet of God (*Bhagawad Padakruti*) and the *chandlo* represents the *bhakta*. The *bhakta*’s ‘niche’ is at the lotus feet of God (*Arthadeepika - Tika Bhashya*). This also represents the *Bhakta - Bhagwan* mode of worshipping God along with His choicest devotee, the *Gunatit Sadhu*.

#### (4) The benefits of Tilak-chandlo.

The *Tilak-chandlo* signifies *dasatva* -the *bhakta* offering devotion as a servitor. Therefore, in his heart the *bhakta* has a constant awareness that, “I am the servant of God”. Thus one attains humility in life. It is said that one who is humble is liked by God, and one who is liked by God is liked by all. In addition, one is constantly inspired to observe God’s injunctions, major or minor. In case we falter, then God can re-guide us on to the right path. We are also prevented from performing bad acts and therefore strengthened morally. Unscrupulous characters will automatically avoid us. This *bhakta* will not fear being ridiculed by society, on the contrary he will feel proud to be a devotee of God. He becomes a master of his mind rather than a slave.

The collective benefits include subjugation of the baser instincts, strengthening of the *Atma*, and an increased faith in God.

It is for such reasons that in society, certain groups of people are made to wear uniforms, for example, the police, the military and naval forces, nurses, judges and others. By wearing white clothes, the nurse does not derive inspiration to serve any better. The judge does not become any wiser by his black cloak and wig. But an external symbol like the uniform increases the awareness of one’s duty and responsibility. Similarly, the *tilak-chandlo* constantly ‘whispers’ an awareness in the *bhakta*, to be a true *bhakta*, a humble servitor.

### (5) What is Mansi Puja?

There are two modes of worship. *Pratyaksha* means 'that before the eyes'. So when God is *Pratyaksha* i.e. manifesting before us, we can worship Him by using various material offerings. But when God is not *Pratyaksha*, one can offer such materials to the *Archaswarup* - the *murti*. But in the absence of both the *Archaswarup* and material offerings, one has recourse to the *manomayi* (in the mind) *murti* with *manomayi* offerings. This is the second mode of worship known as *Mansi puja*. In other words, *mansi puja* is the mental worship of God.

In Vach. Sarangpur 3, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has revealed that, if the *pratyaksha puja* and *mansi puja* of God are both offered with whole hearted adoration, intense love and humility, they are both equally fruitful.

Just as the *pratyaksha puja* of God is performed with *shodshopchar* materials (ref. Ch. 1), one can do *puja* with the same materials, mentally. One can mentally offer fruits and garments according to the seasons of the year. In Vach. Gadhada III. 23, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has given a beautiful elaboration of *mansi puja*.

### (6) The benefits of Mansi Puja.

The added benefits of *mansi puja* is that it fulfils the desires and feelings of devotion of our hearts. We are free to serve to God, the food dishes, garments and ornaments that we personally adore in any amount we like. The sky is the limit. Other benefits include :

- Our worldly desires and cravings are diverted into devotional service.
- Even the poor can serve rich offerings.
- God becomes ours and He becomes like us. Then meditating on Him is easier.
- According to Vach. Gadhada III. 23, love for the *pratyaksha*

form of God increases.

- According to Vach. Sarangpur 3, the *manan* and *nididhyasan* (ref. Glossary) necessary for God- realization are facilitated by *mansi puja*.
- The stability and concentration of the mind increases and so one experiences peace of mind.

### In Health and Creativity.

Recent medical research in the field of Psychoneuro-immunology (PNI) has shed great light on the effects of mental imagery or visualization on our immune system and creativity. *Mansi puja* uses mental visualization. In fact, it is mental visualisation. Today it is advocated by many Western medical scientists in healing and overcoming disease. Bernie Siegel, a cancer surgeon, in *Peace, Love and Healing* gives an example of a nine-year old boy named Garrett Porter, who had an inoperable and incurable brain tumour. Garrett resorted to visualising a “Star wars” scenario. In his mind he constructed a model, in which he was a leader of a space squadron fighting a successful battle against an invading evil planet - his tumour. Everyday he visualized that he was firing missiles at the planet. Five months later, his brain CT scans showed no evidence of tumour! No other therapy had been given. Mental visualization alone had wiped out the tumour.

David Harp, a researcher in relaxation techniques, recommends his “three-minute mini-meditation”. One visualizes a beautiful mountain or sea side scene, and savours the atmosphere. This is done for three minutes, and repeated five times a day. Harp claims that this relaxation technique includes the same relaxation and associated benefits as that of a single 20 minute session like Benson’s. Again, it is hardly surprising that Bhagwan Swaminarayan has given an injunction to his *bhaktas* to do the “Five - period *mansi*”. *Mansi*, short for *mansi puja*, usually takes between three to five minutes. It

depends on the individual. The first *mansi* is in the morning to bathe God and offer garments and food during *nitya-puja*. The second around midday, to offer lunch. The third is at 4 p.m., when fruit and juices are offered. The fourth is in the evening to offer dinner. In the final *mansi* at night, we offer water or milk before God retires for the night in a cosy and perfumed bed. The more vivid the imagery, the better the devotion and the better the relaxation

Therefore, if one incorporates this in one's daily work schedule then the day's stress and tension are either minimized or obviated altogether. In fact, your work becomes your play and work becomes worship.

Harp's "three minute mini-meditation" five times a day, is similar to Swaminarayan's "Five-period *mansi*." In addition to health benefits, Olympic champions use imagery in training and competitions. Runner James Robinson mentally rehearsed every split second of the 800 metres he would run in races down to "the hiss of his breath and the crunch under his feet," hoping it would spell the difference between first and second place. World champion diver Greg Louganis visualized his dives thoroughly before jumping. In the East, visualisation plays an integral role in oriental acrobatics and martial arts such as Aikido and Kung Fu.

### **(7) What is a Mantra? Why chant mantras?**

When a man repeatedly thinks of something in his mind, that thought will invariably take form. "You become what you think", is an oft heard saying. Every individual accepts some ideals to become successful or attain greater heights in his field and then repeatedly thinks on them. Businessmen strive to be the best. Children aspire to be Olympic champions or scientists. In this way, only by holding onto such precise thoughts and repeatedly drilling them, can an individual

attain success. This thought can be called a *mantra*, defined in Sanskrit as :

*Mananat trayate*

i.e. Constant thinking or reflection on a word or phrase which uplifts us is called a *mantra*.

That which clarifies the goal of life is a *mantra*.

The phrase “Quit India” became a *mantra* for the Indian people. Its result was that foreign rule came to an end. The *mantra* took a form.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy made a promise to the American people, “We shall be the first to land on the moon...” This *mantra* galvanized the whole scientific establishment into action. The *mantra* took a form.

Every great person in history has adopted an ideal, a course of action and stuck to it till it bore fruit. This ideal can be termed a *mantra*.

These are worldly examples of a *mantra*. Similarly, on the spiritual path to transcend *maya*, a *mantra* is necessary. A word or sentence which glorifies *Parmatma* is a *mantra*.

Thinking about the glory of God induces love for Him. Repeated vocalization of the *mantra* or God’s glory is called *Japa*. Constantly thinking about Him will increase His glory in our hearts. So a *mantra* is also regarded as God’s form.

### **(8) The Swaminarayan mantra.**

The word *Swaminarayan* is composed of two words; *Swami* and *Narayan*. *Swami* represents *Aksharbrahman* Gunatitanand Swami and *Narayan* represents *Purna Purushottam* Sahajanand Swami, also known as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In the *Swaminarayan mantra*, the worship (*Upasana*) of Narayan or Purushottam, by becoming *Swami-rup* (like *Swami*) or *Akshar-rup* is clearly enjoined. This then is the meaning of the *Swaminarayan mantra*. By chanting it, one realises Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

### (9) How should one chant a mantra?

Stability and concentration of the mind are pre-requisites for *mantra* chanting. After shutting out all other thoughts from the mind, one should chant the *mantra* for pleasing God and for one's own redemption only. A mind steeped in worldly thoughts or disturbed by the baser instincts will not be able to concentrate on God. So the mind will also be unable to focus on the *mantra*. Its chanting will be impossible. For this, one should sit on a pure *asan* in a quiet area. Withdrawing one's *vritti* (attention) from all material objects, then focusing the attention on the *murti* of God, one chants the *mantra*, vocalizing without disturbing others.

### (10) The benefits of mantra chanting.

By faithfully chanting the *mantra*, glorifying *Parmatma*, one pleases Him. He also fulfils any pious wishes of the *bhakta*. In the *Sampradaya*, it is common knowledge that when Yogiji Maharaj was bitten by a cobra in Gondal mandir, his Guru Shastriji Maharaj instructed all the *bhaktas* present to chant the Swaminarayan *mantra*. The effects of the poison soon subsided. Without any side effects, Yogiji Maharaj resumed his activities the very next day.

The body also benefits in other ways. The troubled mind is calmed. When this happens, its effects reverberate throughout the whole body. Relaxation occurs at all levels (ref. Ch. 2. No. {11}).

An individual with a calm mind will also have great mental stability and poise. Decisions made with such a mind help a man progress in life. This helps establish peace and harmony with friends and relatives. In contrast, bad decisions, made by a tense and anxious mind will entail an endless series of problems in life. So *mantra* chanting provides both material and spiritual benefits.

### (11) What is a mala?

Our busy daily schedule and laziness prevent us from remembering God even once during the day. Then, the *sadhus* convince us to remember God once ... five times.. eleven times a day. A need then arises for keeping a count on the number of *mantra japas* performed. The count also develops a feeling of contentment that one has performed one's fixed number of *japas* daily. As a result, to ease counting, the *mala* (rosary) has come into being.

### (12) Why are there 108 beads in a mala?

In one *pala*, one breathes six times. Two and a half such *palas* equal one minute. Therefore a man's average number of breaths is fifteen per minute, and 900 in one hour. Therefore, in 24 hours, according to the shastras, there will be 21,600 breaths. This is revealed in the Chudamani Upanishad (32/33);

*Shat shatani divaratro sahasranyekavinshatibi;  
Etatsankyatmakam mantra jivo japati sarvada.*

i.e. It is arbitrarily taken that we are awake for twelve hours and asleep for twelve hours. During the twelve hours of the day, we breathe 10,800 times (discounting the twelve hours of the night). The *bhakta* would ideally like to chant God's name at every breath. Because this is not practical, the shastras have prescribed the *Upanshu* method. In this, the fruit of every *mantra* is multiplied a 100 fold and so during the day, 108 *mantras* are to be chanted whose fruits will amount to 10,800 - equivalent to the number of breaths taken.

*Upanshu syat shataganaba*

(Manu Smruti - 2/86)

In this way, turning one *mala* of 108 beads, is equivalent to chanting God's name at every breath. With this sentiment in mind, the rishis assigned 108 beads in a *mala*.

Another school of thought bases the number 108 on the

arrangement of the universe. The sun and moon play a vital role in the life of man. The seasons occur as a result of their movements. The ancient rishis divided the sun's motion into 27 parts. The name *nakshatra* is used to describe the group of stars in each of these 27 parts. Our *japa mala* came to be based on the series of these 27 *nakshatras*. Each *nakshatra* is subdivided into four sections called *charan* (feet). So in the 27 *nakshatras* there are 108 *charans*. Therefore the number of beads assigned to a *mala* is 108.

Where two ends of the series of *nakshatra* meet, that area is given the name "Mount Sumeru". In the same manner, *Sumeru* is the name given to the largest bead; of a different shape, which joins the two ends of the *mala*.

### (13) How to do a mala.

The *mala* is held on the middle finger of the right hand. The middle finger of the right hand is used because it is connected with the heart by a subtle meridian. The shastras proclaim the heart as the main site for God to reside in a man's body.

*Hrudi tishtheadashangulam.*

(Yajur Veda 31)

Therefore the *mala* is held and moved on the middle finger to influence the heart. The *mala* is not fruitful if held in the left hand. The beads are moved towards oneself, by the thumb, one by one. The forefinger should not touch the beads. For every bead moved, one should utter "Swaminarayan". One chants the Swaminarayan *mantra* 108 times during one *mala*. When the *Sumeru* is reached, one should not let it pass like the other beads, but the *mala* should be reversed at this point. Therefore one actually re-starts turning the *mala* with the last bead of the previous round.

### (14) The Sumeru of a mala.

The *nakshatras* travel in the heavens keeping the *Sumeru* as

the epicentre. The *Sumeru* remains stationary. The *mala* is a symbolic representation of the *nakshatra* series of stars. A similar importance is attached to the *Sumeru* of a *mala*. When the *Sumeru* is reached, the devotee touches it and then reverses the direction of the *mala* and resumes the *mantra* chanting.

### (15) Why wear a mala round the neck?

To maintain the purity of a *mala* used for *mantra* chanting, it is ideally placed in a cloth bag called a *gaumukhi*. The right hand fits loosely into the *gaumukhi* and the *mala* is then turned. When one finishes doing the *mala*, it is put away along with the *gaumukhi*. But in the *gaumukhi*'s absence, the *mala* is worn around the neck rather than carrying it in one's pockets where it can repeatedly come in contact with all sorts of items, like sweets, currency, handkerchief, and so on.

There are health benefits according to the Ayurvedic shastras. The beads if made from Tulsi, Sandalwood or Rudraksh plants or trees can radiate their medicinal properties in the neck region to prevent or treat thyroid disorders. The Rudraksh *mala* is also famed for its healing effects on heart disease.

### (16) What is the Tapa mala?

*Tapa* means austerities. By doing *tapa*, the *indriyas* (sense organs) are controlled and their energies are sublimated, onto a higher, spiritual plane. In any field, success results only from self-restraint and therefore *tapa* is an important factor. A person who is constantly indulging in worldly pleasures cannot hope to reach the heights of success. Even astronauts travelling into space or mountain climbers wishing to scale Mount Everest or other sportsmen, have to undergo severe training - involving both mental and physical restraints such as : eating and drinking in moderation or foregoing food, water or sleep for many days, lifting weights, running, etc. The body is purposely subjected

to intensive training and self-abnegation. For example in some world class sporting events, celibacy is practised prior to competition.\* In short, to reach a higher goal one has to sacrifice some sensual pleasures. This is the modern equivalent of *tapa*.

The *bhakta* who is determined with zeal, “to realize God, at any cost, come what may,” will also keep his mind controlled and subject himself to self-abnegation.

Usually, during *mantra japa* one sits in the yogic postures of either *siddhasan* or *padmasan* or simply cross-legged. *Mantra japa* is the consolidation of one’s goal to realize God. With this awareness, one stands on one leg, raising both hands high and does the *mala*. This is known as *Tapa mala*. It represents the above sentiments of the staunch *bhakta*, of attaining God at any cost disregarding any pain or tribulation. Another sentiment also prevails in the Satsang.

When Shri Swaminarayan left home at the age of eleven, and travelled through the forests of India, as Neelkanth, he performed austerities standing on one leg for over two months in Muktanath, high in the inhospitable ranges of the Himalayas. The *bhaktas* reminisce this episode, empathising with Neelkanth when doing the *Tapa mala* in *Nitya-Puja*.

### (17) What is Pradakshina (circumambulation)?

Circumambulation has an interesting history in the world’s cultures. It was practised by the Greeks, Romans, Celts and the Gauls. Among the last two, it was the custom of going round an individual who was considered holy. The Irish people, even today, when burying their dead, walk at least once, sometimes three times, round the graveyard, “sunwise” with the coffin. The Roman Catholic Church also uses it in the consecration of churches and in the enthroning of bishops. The Latins call it “dextratio” and perform this in marriages. Muslims walk several times round the Ka’ba at Mecca and Christians perform the

same ritual round the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem.

In the *Sbatapatha Brahmana*, the *pradakshina* represents the daily march of the sun, rising in the east, travelling south and then setting in the west. When the Brahmin priests perform *pradakshina* they utter the sentiments, “Sunwise, let this sacred work of ours be accomplished,” and then walk three times round sunwise.

Incidentally, circumambulation in the reverse direction is called *prasavya* in Sanskrit i.e. walking anti-clockwise, which is considered unholy.

*Pradakshina* is a form of *puja*, of reverence. In ancient times, man used to dance in a circular motion around his favourite friend to show his respect and joy on meeting him. Similarly, the chosen leader of a group would be placed in the centre of a circle and the others would dance around him. We witness this even today.

The greatest leader is *Parmatma*. He is the epicentre of all activity. To offer respect, to convey one’s joy in meeting Him, He is kept in the centre and man circumambulates Him. This is *Pradakshina*.

In life, if God is kept in the centre of any activity, then no obstacle is insurmountable.

In the epic Mahabharat, the sage Vyas has given the same meaning to *Pradakshina*. Whoever has kept God as his guide in life, has always attained success. Whenever the Pandavas kept Shri Krishna as their guide, they were successful. But when they gambled, they did not heed Shri Krishna’s advice and paid dearly, losing their kingdom and prestige in the process.

Whilst performing *Pradakshina* one should constantly pray to God, “O Maharaj! Please remain the epicentre of all my activities.” In return, we, His *bhaktas*, should promise Him that, “in life we will keep You and the *Gunatit Sadhu* in the epicentre of all our activities.”

One should do eleven or more *Pradakshinas* during the morning *Puja*. *Pradakshina* of *murtis* in mandirs is also a common ritual. Yogiji Maharaj invariably advocated devotees in pain or distress to faithfully perform 51,101 or more *Pradakshinas* of Akshar Deri, our most sacred and miraculous shrine, at the mandir in Gondal. This invariably solaced them.

Doing only one *Pradakshina* or one *dandvat* is considered inauspicious and insulting to the Deity.

### (18) What is Pranam?

Generally, when two people meet, the western mode of greeting is to shake hands and say, “How do you do?” or “Pleased to meet you,” or plain “Hello”. The Muslims say, *Salam Malekam* and squeeze each other’s hands.

The Hindu tradition is different. One does not shake the other person’s hands, but brings one’s palms together, in *pranam*. One also simultaneously bows one’s head slightly, to pay respect to the person opposite. At the same time the name of God or a deity is always spoken e.g. *Jai Shri Krishna*, *Jai Shri Ram*, *Jai Swaminarayan*, *Jai Narayan*, or *Jai Ambe*. This is the simple *Pranam*, also known as *Namaskar*.

### (19) What is Dandvat Pranam?

To show one’s insignificance and respect towards God and His *Sadhu*, one does *Dandvat Pranam*, wherein one lies down prostrate on the floor with arms outstretched towards the *murtis*. This is akin to a stick - *danda* lying on the floor.

### (20) What is Sashtang Dandvat Pranam?

*Ashtang* means eight body parts. *Sashtang* means with eight parts. In this type of *pranams*, the eight parts of the body which should touch the floor are :

*Oorasa shirasa drushtya manasa vachasa tatha padabhyam*

*karabhyam janubhyam pranamo - sbtangam moochyate.*

i.e. :

i) *Janubhyam* - thighs, ii) *Padabhyam* - feet, iii) *Karabhyam* - hands, iv) *Oorasa* - chest, v) *Manasa* - mind, vi) *Shirasa* - head, vii) *Vachasa* - speech, viii) *Drushtya* - eyes.

*(Abanik Sutravali)*

Since all of man's karmas (actions) are performed either by the mind, or the body or by speech and since every karma in life should be offered to God, the mind and speech are also included in the eight parts during *Sasbtang dandvat pranam*. The male members offer these *pranams* to God, the Guru and *sadbus*.

### (21) What is Panchang Pranam?

*Panchang* means five body parts : i) head, ii) hands, iii) feet, iv) mind and v) speech.

Males offer *panchang pranams* to *sadbus* and parents. The females offer only *panchang pranam* to God, *murtis* and parents.

For the males, if space prevents one doing *Dandvat Pranams*, then *Panchang pranams* can equally be offered. In both forms, the person doing the *pranams*, while still on the floor should touch the feet of the revered one, then bring the sanctified hands to one's eyes. This is known as *charan sparsh* - feet touching. The *bhavna* behind *charan sparsh* is that one's whole self is sanctified or blessed by the holiness of the person being touched.

### (22) The benefits of Dandvat Pranam.

In the *Dandvat pranam*, three yogic postures are involved :

- i) *Namaskarasan*, ii) *Prasaranasan* (one foot) and
- iii) *Bhujangasan*.

These help relieve backache and increase the flexibility of the spinal column. The muscles of the neck, shoulders, chest and lower back are toned. It increases efficiency of the pancreas

and adrenals and helps prevent diabetes.

By monitoring the effects on blood pressure, mental poise and hormone levels, medical researchers have discovered that the *Dandvat pranam* posture has the greatest effect in maintaining an internal equilibrium.

When a man becomes angry, detrimental chemical and nervous changes occur in the body and the brain. Ego is the cause of this anger. By doing the *dandvat pranam* one's ego diminishes. Subsequently one's anger also lessens gradually. The ultimate aim is to remove ego completely. *Dandvat pranam* helps to achieve this and will result in mental peace as well as gaining physical benefits.

### (23) What is Prarthna?

Prarthna is a silent dialogue between God and the *bhakta*. It is a conversation full of loving feelings and sentiments coming from the heart of the *bhakta*. To acknowledge these feelings, we sometimes resort to the use of words. Since ancient times, man has formed a link with God by prayer. Prayer means to have a yearning to meet God, by surrendering to Him, by having implicit faith, love and *dasatva* - humility towards Him.

In the *Srimad Bhagvatam* (8-2,3,4), the story of the distressed elephant attaining succour is well-known. God incarnated on Earth solely to free him from the crocodile's clutches.

### (24) What factors can be included in prarthna?

Having grasped the real meaning of prayer this question does not arise. All feelings coming from the heart, of love and servitude towards *Parmatma*, are collectively termed prayer. Prayers by great *sadhus* and *bhaktas* of the past may also reflect and enhance our own feelings.

Yogiji Maharaj's famous and extremely evocative prayer in Mahelav, the birth place of his Guru Shastriji Maharaj, is not

only a landmark in the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya* but it also inspires us to become introspective of our own feelings towards God and the *Satsang*.

There is another famous prarthna in the Satsang. During a Fuldol festival in Sarangpur, Saurashtra, the women devotees of Gujarat offered a unique prarthna to Bhagwan Swaminarayan which has been included in the, *Bhaktachintamani* (Ch. 64). It begins :

*“Mahabalwanta maya tamari, jene avariya naranari...”*

i.e. You, who have delivered us from the great darkness of *Maya*...

The women’s prarthna reflects the feelings of what the ideal *bhakta* should ask from God.

In Vach. Gadhada I. 48; Bhagwan Swaminarayan shows us how to pray :

*O Maharaj! Protect us from our inner foes - the instincts of lust, anger, greed, temptation, ego and jealousy, and grant us the company of your devotees.*

*O Maharaj! O Swamin! O Krupasindho! O Sharnagat Pratipalak! Deliver us from evil company.*

In Vach. Gadhada III. 39, He adds : “Deliver us from the *maya* of “I” and “mine” and bless us to increase our love for You. Also, grant us the boon to associate with and love the *Sadhu* who has overcome *Maya* and who loves You.”

## (25) The things we should NOT pray for.

Since the *bhakta* should not wish for even the four types of *Mukti* - salvation, he should obviously not wish for material or bodily comforts which are ephemeral. After surrendering his mind, body and possessions to God, he firmly believes that his *prarabdha* (fate) lies in God’s will. He continues to offer devotion with joy, believing that any episodes of pain or happiness are the result of God’s will. For the ideal devotee, the goal is God

only, not the mundane objects or happiness.

Nevertheless, on occasions when a *bhakta* is overwhelmed with worldly misery, to prevent himself from slipping into a lower, sinful path, he can pray, for succour, to God - his Swami (Vach. Vartal 5). But one should not expect God's answer to comply with one's wishes. It is important to freely accept God's actions after having prayed.

## (26) The benefits of Prarthna.

Praying deepens our love for Bhagwan and strengthens the pious feelings in our hearts. Love has forever learnt to give, not to ask. As this selfless love develops, simultaneously the feelings of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* - the whole world is my family - develop. Our inner instincts of pride, jealousy and hate, are erased. Consequently, not only do we experience peace, but physical illnesses resulting from internal, mental discord either abate or disappear completely.

Modern research into the effects of prayer have revealed interesting results. Dr. Randy Byrd, a cardiologist at the University of California at San Francisco, conducted an experiment on 393 I.C.C. patients. He divided them into two groups. One group was prayed for, unknown to the patients in that group. The other group remained as it is - a control. All other factors remained the same for both groups. The results showed that the group that was prayed for, did better in three ways : the need for antibiotics, the need for intubation and the incidence of pulmonary oedema (fluid accumulation in the lungs) all decreased markedly.

In *Every Man's Search*, Rebecca Beard cites the case of a female patient suffering from arthritis. She was troubled by her husband's poor English pronunciations. The physician treating her, prayed for her and also asked her to pray for relief from the disease in the following manner : " O Lord! I will not tell my

loved ones to do things my way. I will not expect them to obey and follow my instructions. Give me the strength to only love my dear ones. I will not expect them to follow my beliefs.” The woman was subsequently cured of her arthritis.

In this way prarthna subdues the inner foes and this in turn circumvents the physical illnesses - whose roots are the inner foes. A greater benefit is that family quarrels and social antagonism dissolve.

Thus, there are benefits at the individual and social levels. The seeds for world peace can be sown by prarthna.

Yogiji Maharaj’s prarthna in Mahelav is replete with sayings about avoiding fault finding and talking pessimistically. He implores us to always talk and think optimistically, extolling the glory of God. The prayer bubbles over with exuberant love offered to God reflecting his own saintly and sublime state. By loving God we experience the bliss of His divine abode - *dharm*, here and now, and not just after death.

The true prayer occurs spontaneously from the Atma. It does not require effort. It exudes freely from within.

## (27) Why should one read the Shikshapatri everyday?

*Shikshapatri* is a code of conduct for daily living. Every commercial product has a “How to use” manual book. Problems can arise if the instructions are not followed carefully. Even a common household item like a pressure cooker, can cause serious injury if used without following the instruction manual. What would be the result if we were to walk on the roads without knowing the traffic regulations? Accidents. Similarly, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has given us a set of rules to guide us through life without having accidents and without causing harm to others as well. The “do’s” - *vidhi* and the “don’ts” - *nishedh* of living are given in the holy shastra called the *Shikshapatri*. Therefore it needs to be read carefully, like an instruction manual.

In Vach. Gadhada III. 1. and in the *Shikshapatri*, verse 208, Bhagwan Swaminarayan gives an injunction to the devotees, to read the *Shikshapatri* daily. Failing that, in case one is illiterate, then one should ask someone to read it aloud. If that is not possible either, then one should worship it by doing its *puja* everyday.

The question may arise, that after having understood the codes, what is the need to read them everyday? But it must be borne in mind that the *Shikshapatri* is a sacred shastra - a *Dharma Granth* and an *Achar Sambita*. *Dharma* is a concept that has to be imbibed in one's life; to be lived and this is quite a challenging task. Even though one may know the laws, one may not be able to practice them perfectly. One often slips due to temptation. Therefore only by daily reading, hearing and thinking on the codes and rules can one really weave them into one's fibre. Only then can one practice them with ease. Even the person who has realized *Dharma* in its entirety, observes the codes for the sake of others and will not break the rule of reading the *Shikshapatri* daily.

By reading the *Shikshapatri* daily, one is made aware to obey the codes. This will eradicate our bad attributes. It inspires us to progress higher on the path of devotion. This results in peace at heart.

**(28) If feelings are more important than the actual rituals themselves, then what is the need for performing such rituals?**

For the aspirant - *sadbhak* who has still to fully kindle and consolidate the feelings - *bhavna*, and to maintain their continuity, all these practices need to be observed.

Agreed, that a *sadbhak* who, on attaining God - realization need not observe these codes, but in reality a *sadbhak* who has become a *siddha* will never choose to disregard any trivial

injunction. The reason for this is given in the shastras - that of never trusting the mind :

*Na kuryatkahirchit sakhyam manasi hi anawasthite,  
Yad - wisbrambhat chirat chiranam chaskanda tapa aishwaram  
Nityam dadati kamasya chidram tamanu yerayaha,  
yoginaha krutamaitrasya patyurjayewa poonschali.*

(Bhagwatam 5/6/3-4)

i.e. The mind being hyperactive is forever without stability. Therefore one should never trust it, such that, “ I have conquered it and it will do me no harm”. Even deities and great rishis such as Saubhari, who had with great effort performed great *tapas* (austerities) were ruined by trusting the mind.

i.e. A yogi who trusts his mind, gives lust a free chance to enter it. Then anger and similar inner foes also invade the mind. It is like a man who trusts his unfaithful wife - who betrays him by conspiring with a lover. Similarly the mind, invaded by lust, anger and other foes, destroys the yogi.

In addition, after becoming a *siddha* all the observances should still be followed for the sake of others. The *Gita* (3/21) echoes :

*Yadyadacharati shreshthaha tadtadevetaro janaha,  
Sa yatpramanam kurute lokastadanuvartate.*

i.e. People will follow in the footsteps of great men.

So any practice of a great person will generally be blindly followed by the common masses :

Therefore, if the *siddha* or a great spiritual personality himself avoids the rituals and injunctions, then the novices will also take cue and avoid them. Ultimately, this will harm the novices.

In reality, after these *kriyas* have been perfected, they do not feel burdensome. In fact, they become ingrained in one's self. The thought to ignore or transgress them does not arise.

As long as the *kriyas* feel burdensome, a chore, the feelings will never fructify. One who does not want to observe them, nor walk on the true path, will try to exhibit his intellectual ability by regarding these *kriyas* as useless and hypocritical. He will disregard and discard them. But one who has attained success in his own field, whatever it may be, will closely observe even minute rules and *kriyas* and never spurn them. Even the world's best musicians or sportsmen never miss a single day's practice nor relax their daily routines. Scientists are probably the most meticulous. They strive to prevent the slightest mistake in their research. Why? Because the results of their experiments would be authentic. Laws are either result-oriented or feeling-oriented. In the latter, the effects cannot be seen directly on the result. But its effects though invisible are nevertheless poignant and deep. In a battle, is it not enough for a soldier to *know* how to fight bravely? What then, is the need for a special uniform? He does not need to march during battle. Why, then does he practice marching everyday during peacetime? Is it absolutely necessary to salute a commander to show one's respect? Can one not have respect for him in one's heart? But all these 'rituals' and practices have a positive effect on the soldier and the result is that under even the most critical circumstances, the soldier will never break discipline or disobey orders. Only then can the whole army collectively attain victory.

To awaken the *sadbak's bhavnas*, to attain and perpetuate their stability, spiritual laws are obligatory. For those who have attained perfection or become *siddhas*, the need to observe laws still exists, in order to establish an ideal for others to follow.

### **Do as Parathna really solve problems?**

*"That depends on one's faith. By having faith and keeping up one's efforts the problem will be solved. The prayer is truthful. The one being prayed to is also the Truth. One should have faith that God can*

*see and hear the prayers of countless. One should have faith in whom one is praying to. We lose faith very easily. We expect, in this age of technology, that everything should happen instantly. But after what efforts was Edison successful in inventing the light bulb? We are aiming to become brahmarup here. For that, one should pray faithfully. God is the all-doer. Have faith. He will do the rest.”*

**– Pramukh Swami Maharaj.**

## 4. Mahapuja

Bharat's *Samskruti* (culture) is a *Yagna Samskruti*. As we saw earlier in Ch. \_\_\_\_, Yagna is a medium through which devotees offer devotion to the devas by recalling their benevolence on us. In Sanatan Dharma's Vedic period, to offer devotion to these devas, a ritual prevailed to offer *hom* in a yagna. To repay our debt to the *devas* and please them, the Vedic rishis formulated *nitya* or *naimittik yagnas* in the daily lives of the people. Over time as man's population increased, the rishis foresaw that not everybody was able to perform yagnas daily. For them, they enjoined *nitya puja* as an alternative. From this evolved a morning puja ritual, which involved welcoming one's worshipful deity (*aradhya deva*) and devotionally offering *shodshopchar puja*.

This Vedic puja ritual prescribed by the rishis forms the basic framework of the *Mahapuja* of the Swaminarayan Sampraday. *Mahapuja* differs from the *nityapuja* performed daily by devotees. *Nityapuja* involves *dhyana*, *mansi puja*, *mantra japa*, *pradakshina*, *dandvat* and *prarthna*. Through these, devotees offer worship to Bhagwan Swaminarayan and His Gunatit successors. The Mahapuja involves shodshopchar Vedic puja invoking and worshipping Bhagwan Swaminarayan, His Gunatit successors and Aksharmuktas.

### History of Mahapuja.

The first reference of Mahapuja in the Swaminarayan Sampraday, in the Shikshapatri (77), in which Bhagwan Swaminarayan enjoins devotees to perform Mahapuja as a special vow during Chaturmas. However, the first Mahapuja was performed on Jeth sud 11 Samvat 1886 ( /6/1830) in Gadhada by Gopalanand Swami, on the day after Shriji Maharaj returned to Akshardham. He performed it in front of Gopinath Dev in the mandir, to solace the grief-stricken Dada Khachar. After

this the Mahapuja went into dormancy.

In Samvat 1901 (1845), Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami requested Gopalanand Swami to perform Mahapuja in the Junagadh mandir, to improve the livelihood and eradicate the mundane misery of devotees in Sorath (area surrounding Junagadh).

A stalwart of Vedic rituals, Gopalanand Swami drew up a *Yantrapatal* (diagram) for the Mahapuja (see photograph). Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami then appointed his disciple and scholar, Vasudevanand Brahmachari, to perform the first Mahapuja on Jeth sud 11, Samvat 1901. This was exactly 15 years after the first Mahapuja and after Shriji Maharaj's return to Akshardham. On this occasion, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami extolled immense glory of the Mahapuja and declared that those who have Mahapuja performed, will have all their auspicious wishes fulfilled by Parmatma. Gopalanand Swami too said, "Here in Junagadh, resides Gunatitanand Swami, Shri Hari's Akshardham manifest. Therefore those who have Mahapuja performed here, will be relieved from all mental and physical miseries and poverty, and their auspicious wishes will be fulfilled."

Henceforth by Gunatitanand Swami's command, his disciple Vasudevanand Brahmachari and his successor Brahmachari Achintyanandji, continued to do the Mahapuja daily.

## Glory of Mahapuja

This is described in Sanskrit:

*Sarva kashta nirvuttyartham sukha samruddhi hetave.*

*Grab dosh vināshāya karma pidoshāntaye.*

*Kām dugdbewa sarvadā Gopāl Muni preritā,*

*Sarvadā shraddhayā kāryā, mahāpluja susiddhidā.*

i.e. One should do Mahapujā of Bhagwan Swaminarayan for: relieving pains, prosperity, circumventing *grabdosh* (planetary

misery) and for peace from the pain of one's karmas. Inspired by Gopalanand Swami, like the *Kamdbenu* cow, the Mahapuja of Shri Swaminarayan, which will grant all *siddhis*, should be performed permanently with faith.

## Legacy

In this manner, Mahapuja originated in Junagadh. From here it gradually spread to other mandirs.

Shastriji Maharaj then commenced the Mahapuja in Akshar Deri, on Gunatitanand Swami's cremation site. He showed Yogiji Maharaj how to perform it and then commanded him to do it everyday (Ishwarcharandas 1989 III:719)

Yogiji Maharaj then exuberantly extolled Mahapuja's glory. Pramukh Swami Maharaj also often extols its glory. He declares, "Mahapuja is the essence of yagna."

In the BAPS sadhu training centre, Mahapuja is taught to all new sadhus. It is performed every morning after *mangala arti* in all *shikharbaddh* mandirs by sadhus, and in most Hari mandirs by the *grubastha pujaris*. Its duration is about 1.5 hours. It is also performed by sadhus for devotees moving into a new home, business or factory.

## Mahapuja Rituals

The following are invoked and offered worship:

Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, Gopalanand Swami at the centre. Around them, in a circular placement the following are also invoked: Bhagwan Swaminarayan's paramhansas, exalted devotees and Akshar muktas, Radha-Krishna, Lakshmi-Narayan, Nar-Narayan, Gauri-Mahesh (Shiv-Parvati), Vishnu, Surya, Ganpati, and other avatars and devas.

**The following Vedic rituals are performed:**

*Shantipaath, Swastivaachan, Kamkan Bandhan, Devaabbivandan,*

*Nyasvidhi, Kalashpujan, Aahwaan-Sthaapan* and *Shodshopchar puja. (ref. p.)* This is followed by *Janmangal Paath*-reciting the 108 divine names of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Thus the Mahapuja ritual is unique to the Swaminarayan Sampraday. Through the Mahapuja, devotees experience immense spiritual solace when beset by mundane problems and vicissitudes; a surefire stress buster and spiritual booster.

## 5. Arti

- What is Arti?
- During Arti why are the bell, drum and conch shell sounded?
- After Arti, why is water from a conch-shell sprinkled around the Arti?
- Why do we put money in the Arti when we take Aska ?
- Is there a prescribed manner for performing the Arti ?

### (1) What is Arti?

As we saw earlier in Ch. 1, *Pujavidhi* is a ritual to offer respect to and welcome God. When guests come home, do we seat them in the dark? We quickly switch on extra lights. Similarly, *Arti* is a symbol of welcoming *Parmatma*. Only through the light (*prakash*) of knowledge (of His glory) can one welcome God in one's heart. The symbol of this knowledge is light. Only in the light can one have the *darshan* of God.

So, *Arti* is the *vidhi* that welcomes God with light. It is also defined in the shastras that :

*Asamantat ratibi.*

i.e. O *Parmeshwar!* Let my total love be for You only.

*Arti* is the prayer offered with such sentiments.

In ancient mandirs of India, hardly any daylight reached the inner recesses of the sanctum sanctorum. The *darshan* of God was made possible with *deeps* or *divas*. To have the *darshan* of all the limbs of God, the *divas* were held near each part.

The *bhakta's* inherent feelings about *Arti* are: "Just as one can have the *darshan* of God by the flame of the *Arti*, let me have love for Your divine self."

There is also a *bhavna* in this *vidhi* that "just as the wick of the *divo* burns in the *Arti*, let my body burn away in Your service. Not only that, but to keep the flame of service burning, let there be an abundance of oil in the form of Godly love, and

so let my love be sacrificed in Your service.”

But God has graced all life on Earth by the gift of the *Panchbbutas* - the five elements (see below). To maintain stability He created *Pruthvi* - the Earth. He gave *Jal* or water for life to flourish. He gave *Tēj* - light in the forms of sun and moonlight, as well as *agni* - fire to cook food and the *jathar agni* - digestive fire to digest food. He also gave *Vayu* - air as a medium for breathing and for holding *prana* - the vital air. For movement He gave *Avakash-Akash* - space or ether. To remember our debt to *Parmatma* , we present the *Panchbbutas* at His feet in *Arti*, by offering their symbolic representations.

Sound is a part of *Akash* or space. Therefore the drum, bell and the words (lyrics) sung in *Arti* are symbols of *Akash*. The *dhooop* or smoke from an incense stick is a symbol of *Vayu*. The flame of a *divo* is a symbol of *Tēj* (light). The water in the conch shell is a symbol of *Jal* (water). By doing the *Dandvat Pranam* the *Pruthvi* (earth) element is symbolically offered at the lotus feet of God. In this manner, *Arti* is the offering of the *Panchbbutas* to *Parmatma*.

With precisely these sentiments, in some mandirs the *Arti* is performed using five objects which also symbolically represent the *Panchbbutas*:

- 1) Flower - *Pruthvi* (because smell is an attribute of *Pruthvi*)
- 2) Water in a conch shell - *Jal*.
- 3) *Divo* - *Tēj*
- 4) *Chamarwisip* - *Vayu*.
- 5) White cloth - *Akash*.

The *bbakta* performs *Arti* using these articles in this sequence, and feels that he has placed the *Panchbbutas* at *Parmeshwar's* feet.

(2) Why are the bell, drum and conch shell sounded during *Arti*?

There has always been a deep tie between man's emotions and music. When a man gains something invaluable, or when

he attains success in a particular field, to express his boundless joy he either runs round telling his friends or starts dancing or clapping or makes weird high pitched cries. People in ancient times resorted to such mannerisms. Over time, especially in religious matters, the joy was expressed on a grander and aesthetic manner using the bell, drum, *zalar* (small brass gong) and conch shell.

The *bhakta* also becomes jubilant on meeting God. To express this joy, the *bhakta* is drawn into making auspicious sounds called *nad* with such instruments.

Such *nad* also has an effect on the immediate vicinity. Rhythm affects people in different ways. A military band arouses a fighting spirit. Rock or disco music galvanizes youths to dance wildly. Classical music induces a reflective mood and has a soothing effect. In this way different rhythms and sounds have their own unique effects on the brain and Gody. The collective *nad* of the bell, *zalar* and drum creates a *Mangalik* (auspicious) environment. It spreads the glory of God everywhere. All other thoughts are overcome by the *Arti*'s captivating rhythm and the *bhakta* coalesces into the spiritual.

To hail the presence of God, and to create a divine environment conducive to *Arti* and *Puja*, the *zalar*, conch shell and drum are sounded.

### **(3) After Arti, why is water from a conch-shell sprinkled around the Arti?**

In the Hindu pantheon the water deity is Varuna. It is written in the Puranas that Varuna's security, in guarding anything, is unmatched. No one can get past him. When the *Arti*'s revolutions on Parmeshwar's divine form are completed, the *jyot* (flame) of the *Arti* is suffused with divinity. So that this divinity remains intact, water - symbolic of Varuna, from the conch shell is poured clockwise around the *Arti*.

Then the *bhakta* places both his hands above the *jyot* of the *Arti* for a second or so and then brings them towards his eyes and head to make a slight contact (*sparsb*). This procedure is known as *Aska*. The underlying meaning of 'performing' the *Aska* is that one transfers the divinity of God from the *jyot* of the *Arti* into one's inner self, to awaken divinity within.

The water in the conch shell is also considered sacred. This is then sprinkled on the *bhaktas*.

#### (4) Why do we put money in the *Arti* when we 'perform' *Aska*?

The *Arti*'s *jyot* becomes divine by being waved over the divine form God's. To offer Verevate this form, the *bhakta* donates money.

#### (5) Is there a prescribed manner for performing the *Arti*?

There are varied ways of performing the actual physical *vidhi* of *Arti*. One prescribed method in the shastras is :

*adau chatuhu pada talaikadeshe dwau nabhi deshe sukruta asya mandale sarvangdeshesbu cha saptavarum devartikum bhaktajanaba prakuryat.*

i.e. The *bhakta* should perform *Arti* of the *Deva* in this manner :

First, four *avartans* (revolutions - arm holding the *Arti* should move clockwise in a circle, in the vertical plane) at the lotus feet, then two at the navel, once over the face and finally, seven times encompassing the whole body (*Harililamrutam* 6/4/6). A Sanskrit name for *Arti* is *Nirajanam*, meaning : to fully illuminate the *murti* of God. So from the method described above, we can visualise the meaning of *Nirajanam*.

#### **Arti in the Swaminarayan Sampraday**

Muktanand Swami composed the arti in :.....

The following is a translation of this arti :

Hail Sadguru Sahajanand Swami ! Hail Sadguru Swami !

Merciful Sahajanand, Almighty, with many names.....

At Your lotus-feet, hands together, I bow to You, (and)

Bow my head at Your feet, by which all my miseries are  
smashed.....(1)

O Narayan ! Saviour of sadhus, you took human birth as a  
Brahmin,

Uplifted countless downtrodden, befallen men and  
women.....(2)

O Indestructible ! You perform fresh lilas every day,

At whose feet lie 68 tirths, crores of Kashis and Gayas.....(3)

O Purushottam manifest ! Your darshan will lead,

to freedom from kal, karma and one will be redeemed with  
his whole family.....(4)

O Ocean of mercy ! During this incarnation, You have  
showered immense mercy,

Says Muktanand, by making kalyan so easy.....(5)

Hail Sadguru Swami !

## 6. Kanthi

- What is a Kanthi?
- What should a Kanthi be made of?
- From whom should one get Vartaman? What rules should be observed after getting Vartaman ?
- Why are there two strings in a Kanthi in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya?
- What is the Vartaman vidhi?
- Wearing a Kanthi in the absence of the Param Ekantik Satpurush.

### (1) What is a Kanthi?

*Kantha* means neck. The two strings of miniature wooden beads that a *bhakta* wears round his neck is a *kanthi*. *Kanthi* is a symbol of surrenderance - *sharnagati* to God. The *kanthi* induces awareness in a *bhakta*, that he has surrendered himself to God. God is now his *Swami* - Master.

Any individual who decides to surrender to someone, to be in his servitude, would feel the loss of his self esteem or freedom. One is then less likely to accept another's *sharnagati*. Even the smallest animal craves to remain free. A bed of thorns in freedom would feel more softer than a bed of roses in prison. This is the reality of worldly dependence.

Even the strongest and most powerful man is helpless against the forces of nature. He is even weaker than a blade of grass. Those who cannot easily accept this fact have to bow to it in the end, when they observe natural forces at work in volcanoes, earthquakes, typhoons, tornadoes, tsunamis and drought. There is only one force of power underlying these occurrences - *Parmatma*. There is also peace of mind in learning to accept this profound truth and therein man is better able to progress materially and spiritually. In fact, the acme of freedom is to

accept God's *sharnagati* and be subservient to Him. Accepting His *sharnagati* crushes man's dependency on his technological prowess and scientific ingenuity. *Bhaktas* heartily accept His *sharnagati*, represented symbolically by wearing a *kanthi*.

### (2) What is the Kanthi made of?

The Hindus regard the Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*) plant as a symbol of yagna, of surrenderance. Whenever a *bhakta* donates something, he constantly bears a sentiment in mind that, "This (item being donated) is not mine, it is *Parmatma's*." So the *bhakta* also places a few Tulsi leaves with the item being donated. When *prasad* is offered to God, Tulsi leaves are also placed in each dish. With precisely the same feelings, we offer our body to God, in surrenderance : "O *Prabhu!* This body is Yours, not mine." But instead of offering Tulsi leaves with it, we wear a *kanthi* of Tulsi wood round the neck. Nowadays Tulsi wood is rare and so another sacred wood, sandalwood is used to make the beads.

### (3) From whom should one receive Vartaman?

Which rules are to be observed after *vartaman*? In the holy shastra *Satsangijivanam*, written by Swami Shatanand, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says :

*Samprapya dikshameha bhaktidharmayuktad gurorbhagavateem naraha prak,*

*Archam tataha prapya taduktareetya bhaktim vidadhyadapatindra Vishnobo.*

(Satsangijivanam 2/51/9)

i.e. In this world, after accepting *vartaman* from the beholder of *Dharma* and *Bhakti* - the *Param Ekantik Sadhu*, one receives the divine *murti* of God from this Guru. And by ridding laziness one offers *bhakti* to God as instructed by that Guru.

In this way by the injunction of Shri Swaminarayan, it is ideal to accept *Vartaman* and wear a *kanthi* from the *Gunatit Sadhu*.

The reason for this is that in dire circumstances or when the *bhakta* is on the verge of falling from the path of God, only such a *Sadhu* is able to uplift him by giving guidance and strength. Even the *Acharya* receives *vartaman* from such a *Sadhu*. For example, *Acharya* Shri Viharilalji Maharaj of Vartal was given *Vartaman* and *Kanthe* when just an infant by *Akshar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swami, the first spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

After wearing the *kanthe*, the codes of conduct to be strictly observed by the new *bhakta* are : to abstain from taking alcohol and meat, to abstain from thieving and to abstain from committing adultery; to observe rules pertaining to one's station in life. He also imbibes the way of living prescribed in the *Shikshapatri*.

#### (4) Why are there two strings in the Kanthe of the Swaminarayan Faith?

In Vach. Vartal 5, Bhagwan Swaminarayan advocates service to God along with His choicest *Bhakta*. So the two strings represent God and His *Bhakta*.

In the *Arthadeepika* commentary of the *Shikshapatri*, Swami Shatanand has mentioned the same principle :

*Nanu mala dharane ko hetuhu? Iti chet sbri Radhakrishnasya yugalswarupopasakatwasoochanartham iti awagamyatam.*

i.e. what is the reason for the two strings of the *kanthe*? It is to signify the worship of Radha and Krishna (choicest *bhakta* and God).

#### (5) What is the Vartaman vidhi?

The new-born or newcomer is initiated into the Satsang by a simple ceremony, akin to baptism, called *Vartaman*. Sanctified water is held in the right palm. A *mantra* is then spoken by the initiator, usually a *sadhu*. This is then repeated by the newcomer.

The water is then poured away and the *kanthi* is adorned. The *mantra* spoken is :

*Kala maya papa karma yamadoot bhayadabam,  
Swaminarayanam sharanam prapannosmi sa patu mam.*

i.e. I have come at the lotus feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and may He deliver me from the fear of time, *Maya*, sin, karma and evil. May He protect me.

Accepting the *sharnagati* of God, the *bhakta* is freed from sins of all previous births and helps him to become fearless. He has no need to fear superstitious elements, ghosts, evil spirits, and omens. He is freed of karmas of the past. He places his destiny in Bhagwan Swaminarayan's hands, vowing to live according to His commands.

The principle underlying *Vartaman* involves purification of the *Jiva* before accepting the *sharnagati* of God. The sanctified water cleanses by removing sins. Water itself has the attribute of spiritual cleansing. To be purified in mind, speech and action, water is held in the right palm. There is also another reason for holding water in the hand. As we saw earlier :

*Apsu vai Varunaha.*

(Taittiriya Upanishad - 15/5/6).

i.e. the deity of water is Varuna.

Whenever an oath or a vow is to be taken, it is done with *Varunadeva* as a witness by keeping water (symbolic form of Varuna) in the hand. This is known as *Sankalp*.

*Anrute khalu vai kriyamane Varuno grubhanti.*

(Taittiriya Upanishad 1/7/2/6)

i.e. If the vow is broken Varuna may fine a penalty.

## (6) Wearing a Kanthi in the absence of the Param Ekantik Satpurush.

By the injunction of the *Satpurush*, other *sadhus* can also give *vartaman* and invest the newcomer with a *kanthi*. In this

way, the *kanthi* is said to be equally invested by the *Satpurush* because he is the Guru of all those *sadhus*. They just act as mediators. Similarly, senior women devotees are also eligible to give *vartaman* to new women devotees.

# 7. Mandir

(Temple)

- What is a Mandir?
- What purpose does a Mandir serve?
- What is the need for building large Mandirs?
- The unique features of a Swaminarayan Mandir.

*“The temple is not an archaeological essay, but a sermon in stone, suggesting by its symbolism the rhythm of the cosmos, teaching the lessons of the universal life, and recording the sacred traditions of the Indian people.”*

(E.B. Havell, *A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilization.*)

Historically, though the word *mandir* was exclusively used to denote residential structures in the Gupta period (4<sup>th</sup> cent., CE) it seems to be first referred to as a temple, as well as a house, by Varahamihir (505 CE) in his *Brubhat Sambhita*.

## (1) What is a Mandir ?

God is omnipresent. The *bhakta* sees, loves and reveres this God in every living being - in man, animal, or a blade of grass. He even sees *Parmeshwar* in every non- living thing, in every particle of matter. But to accept the humble and devotional service of His *bhakta*, to give bliss to him, God either personally manifests Himself on earth, or through a *murti* in a dwelling called a *Mandir*.

## (2) What purpose does a Mandir serve?

In the mandirs built in conformity with the Agam shastras, the *murti* of God is conserated by reciting Vedic *Mantras*.

The *murtis* sculpted from stone or of metal are not just sculpted statues but the manifest form of *Parmeshwar*. They are revered as such and served as the living form. Devotional service such as waking up Parmeshwar, bathing and then adorning

exquisite garments and ornaments, and offering food, are just some aspects of daily worship from morning till night, when Parmeshwar retires for the night's rest. In this way, the *bhakta* not only enjoys God's varied *darshan* during the day but also experiences bliss.

Added to this, one also comes into contact with the *sadhus* who live within the *Mandir* complex. Their purity and sublime wisdom gives the *bhakta* solace and peace of mind, parameters rarely found elsewhere. The talks of these *sadhus*, though simple and practical are laden with profound spiritual import. Countless people are transformed; their bad habits and addictions removed. They adopt a life suffused with *Bhakti* and *Dharma*. Through the spiritual discourses (*katha*) of the *sadhus*, the *bhaktas* are enlightened about *Atma* and *Parmatma* to help them attain contentment and peace. Even lay visitors experience the presence of God in *mandirs*, where the singing of the *lila* and *kirtans* of God extolling His glory, continuously enrich the *mandir's* atmosphere.

The construction of *mandirs* also perpetuate traditional architectural, sculpting and carving traditions dating back thousands of years. Were it not for *mandirs*, the skills and craftsmanship of Indian Culture would have died out long ago. Intricate stone sculpting and wood carvings are only incorporated in religious edifices. In India, today, excepting *mandirs*, other buildings are rarely constructed using traditional architectural techniques and stone sculptings.

A *mandir* moulds man.

A *mandir* moulds society.

A *mandir* purifies society.

A *mandir* induces morality.

A *mandir* creates stability of mind.

A *mandir* inspires *bhakti*.

A *mandir* achieves peace and happiness.

A *mandir* uplifts lives.

A *mandir* keeps alive traditional architecture and craftsmanship.

### (3) What is the need for building large mandirs?

When large cinemas, theatres, casinos, night clubs and gambling houses are built at great cost, have we ever objected? People do not raise objection to such places coming up, from which society is unquestionably going to degrade shamelessly in terms of morality and character. It seems as if people are not the least concerned when man and society are going to ruin. Why? Because deep within the recesses of man, there exists a soiled character which rationalizes him into abject silence. Those who question, “why build *mandirs*?” are often active members of such houses.

We tend to put forward rational arguments, of building schools, hospitals and orphanages in place of *mandirs*. Agreed that they are all needed. But can a hospital do the job of a school? Will an orphanage do the work of a hospital?

Each has its own unique function. Society needs all of them. We fail to realise that all these institutions primarily depend on man. And to mould a man’s character either directly or through his cultural and family heredity, there is no better educational institution than a *mandir*. To spend money for such an important ‘man- moulding’ school, the *mandir*, is probably the greatest asset and the healthiest contribution to society. Its great size also has an important effect.

Just consider the size of bungalows and country mansions of millionaires and superstars. We also take such good care of our political leaders. The prestige and economic status of the country will reflect the richness of their residences. So it is but natural for *bhaktas* to expect the dwelling of the *Swami* of all creation, to be as grand as possible. In ancient India, where the

kings and maharajas were pious and of a religious disposition, they accepted *Parmeshwar* as the *Swami* of their kingdoms. This inspired them to build large *mandirs* and install the *murtis* of *Parmeshwar*. Today, the *bhaktas* build such lofty *mandirs* which benefit the whole society.

In August 1994, a reporter from *UK Today* -a T.V. network, asked HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj the reason for building a *mandir* in London. Swamiji replied :

“*First of all it is for the many Hindus living in London. Secondly, wherever a man goes, he takes his culture and noble sentiments (bhavnas) with him. This mandir will foster these sentiments.*”

Take away a man’s feelings and he is no better than a robot. By putting constraints on his feelings, his development can become lopsided. It can be damaging for him and society. Boosting his feelings adds meaning to his life. For Hindus, a *mandir* provides such an environment.

#### 4. Unique Features of a Swaminarayan Mandir.

The *shikharbaddh mandirs* of the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya* in India, generally have the following features:

##### (1) The Five *Artis* :—

Name Meaning Approx. times

i. *Mangala* Auspicious awakening 6.00 a.m.

ii. *Shrungar* After breakfast and decoration  
with garments & ornaments 7.30 a.m.

iii. *Rajbhog* After offering grand lunch. 11.30 a.m.

N.B. Although *Arti* is not performed, fruits are offered.  
4.00 p.m.

iv. *Sandhya* Evening. 7.00 p.m.

v. *Shayan* After dinner. God retires for the night’s rest. 8.30 p.m.

(2) The *Maha Puja*-performed every morning between *Mangala* and *Shrungar arti*’s, in the *Sabha Mandap*.

(3) The Five (or three) *Kathas*. Timings are variable in each

*mandir* and the discourses are delivered by the *sadbus*.

- (4) The older mandirs may also store extremely rare and sacred relics of Bhagwan Swaminarayan such as furniture, utensils, hand-woven garments and clothing, palanquins and ox-carts, and other miscellaneous artifacts.
- (5) A *Sadbus' Asbaram* - Living quarters for the *sadbus*.
- (6) A *Sabha Mandap* (Hall) - For holding *katha*.
- (7) A *Dharmashala* - Lodging facilities for pilgrims and the *mandir's* staff.
- (8) A *Bhojanshala* - Catering facilities for pilgrims and the poor.
- (9) A *Gaushala* - Cow-shed, sometimes situated separately from the *mandir* complex if space is restricted.
- (10) A *Pathashala* - For studying *Satsang* literature
- (11) The *Kothar* - General Store.
- (12) The *Bhandar* - Kitchen.

### Modern additions

Offices for *Satsang* Activities like: Youth and *Bal* departments, Women's Wing, a health clinic, a library and a book-stall for *Satsang* publications.

### Functions of Mandirs

*"A mandir increases moral values. If they prevail, then there will be peace of mind. We build homes and factories for our needs. Those are for our personal use, whereas the mandir is such a place where everyone can have equal benefit. On our doors we write, "No admission without permission," but here, everyone is "welcome". The mandir promotes universal brotherhood. The whole world belongs to God. And God belongs to all. Yogiji Maharaj often said, "O Bhagwan! Do good unto all." Here there is no discrimination. We are all here for Atma-realisation and redemption. Peace of mind will be experienced here. Many problems are solved by prayer and darshan of God.*

*"In this world, when someone gives us something, we are always*

*grateful to him. Similarly we should do something for God who has given us so much. Such places are for the redemption of the people. Whoever serves here selflessly with mind, body and wealth, will be repaid infinitely by God.”*

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

## 8. Murti Pran Pratishtha

Murti Pran Pratishtha is the sacred ritual of invoking the Deity in an image by performing rites and chanting mantras stipulated by Panchratra Agam shastras. The image can be one of eight types of materials namely; *shaili* (marble or stone), *laubi* (metallic), *darumayi* (wood), *lepya* (sandalwood paste of clay), *saikati* (sand), *lekhya* (drawn, painted or etched), *manimayi* (precious gems) and *manomayi* (created in the mind - not of any physical material).

### Murti Purification

#### (1) *Karmakutir*

Once the artisan sculptor or painter completes the murti in his work dwelling, it must be purified. This process of purification is known as *Karmakutir*. Firstly, the artisan himself touches the whole murti with a bundle of *darbh* grass. *Darbh* is a long, stalky type of grass, which is considered as having purifying properties. This removes any evil influence off the murti. The artisan then “closes” the murti’s eyes, by smearing a thin layer of ghee and honey. Then either he or brahmin priests perform 200 *abutis* or *boms* while chanting mantras. Other *boms* follow by *abuti* of chanting *Aghor* mantras, mantras which keep disease and death at bay and the *Mrutyunjay* mantra.

The purpose of such purification is to prepare the murti so that when Parmatma arrives to reside in the murti, it can behold the profound change that occurs as the normal equilibrium of the murti will be altered. Additionally Parmatma will be residing in the murti till eternity. This is also an important consideration.

A *nada chhadi* is then tied on the right wrist of the murti. For our purposes here, we shall discuss the rituals as applied to a sculpted or carved 3-dimensional murti.

#### (2) *Jaladhivas*

The murti is then shifted to the *yagna mandap* - area where the yagna is to be performed. Here the murti is submerged in water. This ritual is known as *jaladhivas*. One purpose is to check whether the murti is totally whole, and not *khandit* (damaged) in any way. A small amount of *panchamrut* is added into the vessel. Other *puja dravyas* are added while chanting mantras.

The vessel is then covered with cloth. Then mantras of Agni are chanted for further purification. The cloth is then removed and the murti awakened by sounding a *ghantadi*. The murti is then removed and rubbed dry.

### (3) *Dhanyadhivas*

A layer of (*dhanya*) grain or pulses is then spread on the floor. The murti is laid supine on this layer. More grain is poured over the murti until it is totally covered. The *dhanya* is usually rice or wheat grain. *Dhanyadhivas* further purifies the murti.

### (4) *Ghrutadhivas*

After *dhanyadhivas*, the murti is totally covered with cow's ghee (*gbrut*), hence *gbrutadhivas*. Cow's ghee is considered pure. Since this process endangers the murti - prone to slipping due to the ghee, it is avoided. Instead, a piece of cotton wool soaked in ghee, is placed on one toe of the murti. The murti is again 'awakened' and then placed on a stand or wooden cot.

### (5) *Snapan Vidhi*

This is a grander form of purification involving 108 different types of materials - such as: *panchamrut*, water containing essence of various fragrant flowers and leaves, water which has been poured over the horns of a cow, sugar cane juice, etc. Each *dravya* is placed in a small pot.

This amounts to 108 pots. They are placed in front of the murti in three *vedhis* : *dakshin* (south) *vedhi* has eleven pots, *madhya* (middle) group has eleven pots and the remaining pots in the *uttar* (north) group.

Pouring a liquid on the murti is known as *abbisbek*. *Abbisbek*

is then performed with the contents of each pot. Each *dravya* has its own mantra. Such a vast array of pure substances render the murti immense *shakti* and purity.

(6) *Netra-anavaran*

After the *snapan* ritual, the sculptor stands behind the murti and holds a mirror in front of the murti's face. By looking at the murti's eyes indirectly, reflected in the mirror, he removes the layer of ghee and honey with a gold *shalaka* (needle). This is known as *netra-anavaran vidhi*. Thus the murti's first immensely powerful *drashti* (vision) should not fall on a human being. Instead, it is offered food already arranged in front of it prior to the *netra-anavaran vidhi*.

This is followed by *shodshopchar* puja. After rubbing it dry, it is laid on a new mattress, with food and a pot of water for one night's rest. For sleep, the *Nidra devi* is invoked (*aahawan*) with mantras. All through the night, ten brahmin priests continually perform 200 *homs* in the yagna, away from the sleeping murti. While the priests give *abuti* of ghee in the eight directions (*ashtadikshu*), one drop of ghee is placed in a pot of water. In the morning, water from this pot is sprinkled on the sleeping murti to awaken it, while chanting *uttishtha* mantras.

The murti is then taken from the *yagna mandap* to the *garbha gruh* of the mandir. Here it is placed on the *pindika* (pedestal). While chanting *mangalashatak* - mantras of auspiciousness, a mason cements the murti into the *pindika*. About half an hour later, when the cement has dried, the brahmin priests or the Satpurush enters the *garbha gruh* to perform the murti pran pratishtha!

Prior to this, just as the murti was purified to make it eligible for *pran pratishtha*, the whole mandir too, has to be purified, with similar rituals. The mandir is Parmatma's body, while the murti becomes its atma.

## Pran Pratishtha

*Nyasvidhi*. *Nyas* literally means ‘touching’. *Nyasvidhi* invokes various deities such as Brahma, Indra, Surya and others, in the different parts of the murti. Chanting Parmatma’s *bijmantra*, and with the aid of *darbh* grass and *shalaka* - golden needle, the rite starts from the head and down to the feet.

The Satpurush places his hands a few inches from the murti while the priests chant *bijmantras* invoking Parmatma. Divine shakti of Parmatma emanates from the Satpurush and enters the murti.

First enters *pran* - the life breathe. The ‘jiva’ enters next. Thirdly, the ten *indriyas* are infused. In the BAPS tradition, the Satpurush performs the *netra-anavaran* ritual, of ‘opening’ the murti’s eyes, by removing the coating of ghee and honey with the golden *shalaka*.

This final rite completes the pran pratishtha. This means that Parmatma has now fully graced the murti. The murti is now not termed murti, but the deity invoked. Hence a short puja ritual with *gandh*, rice and flowers is then performed of “Bhagwan Swaminarayan,” rather than “murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.”

In the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, a *Mahapuja* is performed in the mandir’s mandap or a hall, while *abbishek* is performed of the murti in the *garbha grub*. *Shangar* is offered after *abbishek*. Pramukh Swami Maharaj then performs the *pran pratishtha*. *Annakut* is then placed in front of Bhagwan. Swamiji then performs the first arti.

## Shaligram and Jyotirling

Murti pran pratishtha is not necessary for *swayambhu* - self - born images. The *shaligram* of Vishnu is a stone image which has spontaneously appeared and is to be found in the river Kali Gandaki in the Himalayas. There are also the sacred twelve

*Jyotirlingas* - self-formed *lings* of Shiv (see p.).

The Murti pran pratishtha of Sanatan Dharma is unique in all the world's religions. Performed correctly as stipulated by the Agam shastras, this sacred ritual is the most scientific and powerful method of invoking the Divine into a non-sentient image. The key factor of this process is the Satpurush- the Sadhu who has realised Parmatma, who is in constant rapport with Him. Just as tirths in India originally attained their *tirthatva* - sanctity by the association of a rishi or holy personality, similarly, the Satpurush invokes the Divine in the murti.

## 9. Patotsav

Mandirs and murtis form a basic element of the Sanatan Dharma. A traditional sacred ritual prevails celebrating the anniversaries of murti-consecration (Prana Pratishtha) of mandirs. Known as Patotsav, the word is a compound of Paat and Utsav - festival. Paat is derived from Patti, a strip of garment tied on the head of a murti. From this evolved Paat

### Sentiments

In essence, Patotsav is a re-consecration ceremony, re-invoking Parmatma. This stems from the belief that during the whole year, the murtis lose some divinity from two possible factors: 1) any laxity by the pujari in offering devotional worship. 2) the sheer volume of burden heaped at the lotus-feet of the murtis by devotees overwhelmed by maya. However, during the Dadar (Mumbai) mandir's Patotsav in 1987, Pramukh Swami Maharaj clarified that Parmatma's divinity never dissipates. It is only our bhava - devotional love, that ebbs. By celebrating Patotsav, our inner sentiments for Parmatma and Guru are rekindled and reinvigorated.

### Ritual

In the BAPS Shikarbaddh mandirs, sadhus perform a grand Abhishek of the murtis after the Mangala arti in the morning. Abhishek means to pour Panchamrut - milk, yogurt, ghee, sugar and honey, and kesar-jal - water with saffron, on the murtis (see photo gallery). This ritual is performed in a meticulous sequence by chanting specific Vedic mantras, including the Purush Sukta. The sanctified Panchamrut, known as Charanamrut is collected and later availed of by devotees. After Abhishek, the murtis are bathed with water and adorned with *shrunigar* - garments, ornaments and flower

garlands. A small, yet rich Annakut of sweets and savoury dishes is offered. This is followed by Arti. The *Annakut prasad* and *charanamrut* is then distributed.

# 10. Ghar Mandir

(Home Shrine)

- What is a Ghar Mandir?
- What is the function of a Ghar Mandir?
- Choosing a position for the Ghar Mandir.
- Maintaining the purity of the Ghar Mandir.
- Murtis in the Ghar Mandir.
- Pramukh Swami Maharaj's remarks on the Ghar Mandir.

## (1) What is a Ghar Mandir?

*Ghar* means a house, a home.

“My home, our home...”, every individual has a soft corner for his own home even if it is just a damp ramshackle hovel. In India at least, when a relative comes home, or if someone important visits us, we go to great pains in running around to make his visit memorable. What if God Himself pays us a visit? What if God agrees to live with us permanently? Then our joy would know no bounds. We know that the dwelling where God resides is a *Mandir*. Similarly, God's residence in our home is known as a *Ghar mandir*.

## (2) What is the function of a Ghar mandir?

In the *Yoga Darshan* shastra, the rishi Patanjali has described the effects of being in the vicinity of an *Ashtang Yogi* :

*Tatsannidhan vairatyagaha*

i.e. the *Ashtang Yogi* does not harbour any vengeance or malice towards any living organism.

More amazing is the fact that the instinct of violence in any living being that comes near him will also fade away! A lion or tiger will behave as meekly as a domestic cat.

Then what to talk of the Yogi of all Yogis, the beholder of all Yogis - *Parmatma*? Surely His presence in the *Ghar mandir*

will gradually lessen the baser instincts of an individual. The whole atmosphere is transformed into a devotional one, filled with pious thoughts. One is inspired to imbibe these thoughts in one's life. Detrimental influences of television will not encroach this atmosphere. Noble thoughts arise in children. Their faith in *Parmatma* increases and seeds are sown for their character development. To a greater or lesser extent, sooner or later, the *Ghar mandir* will invariably inspire each individual in the home. Thus, God's residence in the home also renders it into a *Mandir*.

To make the home a *Mandir*, it is necessary to have a *Ghar mandir* for the following reasons:

- to increase cultural values.
- to deepen one's *bhakti* and service to *Parmatma*.
- to discourage malevolent thoughts and immoral

behaviour.

To prevent a quarrelsome atmosphere and turn it into a pure one such as a *Mandir's*, it is necessary to have a *Ghar mandir*. When an elderly person like a grandparent is present at home, everyone's behaviour changes for the better. His/her presence smoothen the daily affairs in the home. So naturally, if the supreme *Purusottam Narayan* Himself lives in the home, then one is freed from all worries. He shoulders all the worries.

Everyone may not get a chance to perform *puja* of *Parmeshwar's murtis* at the *Mandir*. But at home, even His *shodshopchar puja* can be personally availed of. The auspicious environment of the *Mandir* is thus created at home.

### (3) Choosing a position for the Ghar Mandir.

When our favourite sports personality visits us, where will we seat him? In the grand sitting room or the scullery? Be it a celebrity or a close friend, we will go out of our way to clean and decorate the house; the front garden, and spray air freshener in the rooms as well. We offer him a comfortable seat. We offer

the most sumptuous food dishes. The same hospitality would be in order for our beloved *Swami*, the *Parmatma* Himself. We would not for a moment think of offering Him a place under the staircase or a cupboard or recess behind the kitchen door! Wouldn't that be insulting and shameful?

If the house is large, even a special room could be set aside for the *Ghar mandir* and *Puja*. In a small house with restricted space, the *Ghar mandir* should be positioned in a prominent place in the main room in full view of everyone to facilitate *darshan*.

#### (4) Maintaining the purity of the Ghar Mandir.

The common saying, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" cannot be more applicable than for the *Ghar mandir*. It should be kept clean, free of odds and ends. It is interesting to note items that are deposited here :- loose coins, matchboxes, cotton, tissue packets, combs, ashes piled up from burnt incense sticks, old mail, and so on! The *Ghar mandir* should not take the form of a general store. The *puja* paraphernalia like the *arti* and *diva* stand, etc., should be washed everyday; the incense and *diva* ashes cleared daily. The paraphernalia should then be stored in a drawer nearby to give the *murti* some breathing space! Ideally, one should have a bath or at least wash one's hands and feet before touching the *Ghar mandir*. There should not be any footwear near it or in the room.

The family member who offers *arti* and *prasad* to the *murtis* should, if possible, have a bath before offering. Slippers or shoes should not be worn while offering.

#### (5) Murtis in the Ghar Mandir.

The *murtis* should be the same as those in one's *Nitya-Puja*, that of Maharaj and the *Gunatit parampara*. Portraits, half *murtis*, torn *murtis* should not be placed here.

## The Ghar Mandir

*“One should sit in front of the Ghar mandir every morning to think about the Atma. The mandir stills the mind. Only after doing Nitya-Puja, Arti and Thal, should one begin the day’s activities. The food one cooks should be offered first to God in the Ghar mandir. We are placing great emphasis on the Ghar mandir because; just as we would like to live in a house, God would also like to have His own house - in our homes. With God ever present in the home, He will keep a loving vigil over our activities.*

*“Once the Ghar mandir is installed, a chaitanya mandir (of the heart) will soon follow”.*



*“Bhagwan Swaminarayan has ordained all the bhaktas in the Shikshapatri (verse 63) to visit the Mandir every evening. If we live afar, and cannot visit it everyday, then we would receive equal fruits by devotedly performing Arti, Thal and Ghar Sabha in the Ghar mandir. By having a Ghar mandir, one is in contact with Parmatma everyday. The Ghar mandir’s presence should not obviate the need for one’s personal Nitya-Puja. If we leave home, even for a few days, we should take the Nitya-Puja just as we do our tooth-brush and shaving kit. Regularity is the key. No matter how trivial an injunction may be, it should still be observed sincerely, with regularity. God will manifest Himself in the home, in the heart, in the family and in the Atma, to those who keep a Ghar mandir.”*

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj

# 11. Satsang Sabha- Ghar Sabha

(Home Discourses)

- What is the importance of the Satsang Sabha ?
- How beneficial is the Satsang Sabha to society ?
- What do the Gunatit Sadhus say about the Satsang Sabha?
- What is the Ghar Sabha?
- How should one do the Ghar Sabha?
- What are the benefits of the Ghar Sabha?
- Pramukh Swami Maharaj's views on the Ghar Sabha.

## 1. What is the importance of the Satsang Sabha?

*Satsang* means to keep the company of *sadhus*, to hold scriptural discourses, to read *satsbastras*. The word *Satsang* is also used as a synonym for the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

*Sabha* is a gathering of people, an assembly. In the Sampradaya *sabha* also denotes a religious gathering.

A *Satsang Sabha* means a gathering of devotees to hold a scriptural discourse (*katha*).

The importance of the *Satsang Sabha* is that it not only sows and nurtures righteous thoughts to fruition but uproots evil thoughts as well.

When man is blinded by his wanton pursuit of materialistic pleasures, he develops evil instincts. At this time, to gain money and power, he will use unscrupulous means to appeal to people's baser instincts, to trap them into evil and immorality. He will convince them that, evil is righteousness, and hedonism is the goal of man's life. This results in man being shackled by addictions and immorality. Life becomes poisonous. A thorny bed of physical, mental and family problems is inevitably created.

The *Satsang Sabha* opens up vistas of righteousness, devotion to God and *moksha*. One is inspired to walk that path. Life

becomes worthwhile. For this reason, Yogiji Maharaj founded the weekly *Satsang Sabha*. Outside the *Satsang*, people keep Sunday a free day, to relieve themselves of the week's tension and turmoil. But in reality, nothing of the sort materializes. People will go to sleep late on Saturdays, and wake up late, more exhausted on Sundays. The rest of the day is then spent in eating, drinking and watching TV, all of which are mentally and physically draining. So true *shantib* results only from *katha* (spiritual discourses extolling God's glory). This strikes the discord at the roots.

*Satsang Sabha* is therefore the gateway to character development, spiritual upliftment and *moksha*.

*Satsang Sabha* adds pages of *Bhakti* (Devotion), *Jnan* (Knowledge), *Vairagya* (Detachment), and *Dharma* (Righteousness) to the annals of life.

The *Satsang Sabha* is a treasure trove of righteous virtues. It is a bond linking awareness, introspection and attachment to God.

As well as being a religious meeting for the *bhaktas*, the *Satsang Sabha* simultaneously functions as a social gathering. This provides social warmth to each individual. In today's society of stressed individuals, social support of this kind is absolutely necessary for the health and stability of the individual and the community.

In his book, *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer*, Kenneth R. Pelletier, a scientist at the Stanford Centre for Research in Disease Prevention, says,

*“Evidence is accumulating that positive social support is necessary for a person's heart. Supportive interactions among people and cultures may affect our ability to resist illness. A sense of belonging and affiliation appears to be a basic human need. There is now abundant evidence to show that social support may be one of the critical elements distinguishing those who remain healthy from those who do not.”*

## (2) How beneficial is the Satsang Sabha to society?

Man is a fundamental unit of society. Society has arisen from man. The stronger the part, the stronger the whole. If man is virtuous, then society will be sublime. The *Satsang Sabha* moulds man into a human, a *bhakta*. Only when man becomes human, do virtues such as truth, non-violence, celibacy, knowledge, and art and creativity bear fruit. Otherwise such virtues can regress into decadence. Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels had great elocution but he used it to misguide people. Hitler's bravery and determination were unmatched, but they were channelled into barbaric atrocities. Nuclear research resulted in the deadly atomic bomb. In contrast, Socrates' oratory helped guide people on the right path. Gandhiji's determination led people towards truth and non-violence.

In creating a sculptural masterpiece, the contribution of a hammer is important. We do indeed faithfully believe that only a good hammer can create a good sculpture. But when we expect a beautiful statue by placing a seasoned hammer in unseasoned hands, the result will be nothing more than a heap of shattered stones. All our expectations disintegrate. Therefore it is important to season the sculptor, not the hammer.

The *Satsang Sabha* moulds the individual who uses the tool. It prepares the sculptor, so that the sculpture of society becomes a masterpiece. Only with such individuals of character can a peaceful society result.

The following Vedic sentiments become a reality through the *Satsang Sabha* :

“*Sangachhadhwam Samwadadhvam...*”

- Let us walk together, let us speak together,

“*Ishawasyamidam sarvam ...*”

- God is present everywhere in this universe,

“*Sarvetra sukhinaha santu ...*”

- Let everyone everywhere (on earth) be happy.

### (3) What do the Gunatit Sadhus say about the Satsang Sabha?

*“One should forego a profit of even Rs. 25,000 and attend the Sunday Sabha. Just as one opens a shop half an hour early to do business, similarly if one realises the importance of the Sabha, then one will surely attend on time.”*

-Yogiji Maharaj

*“By attending the Sunday Sabha, one derives strength to eradicate one’s foibles and baser instincts which are impediments on the path of redemption.”*

- HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

### (4) What is the Ghar Sabha?

*Ghar Sabha* is a handloom which brings together the threads of love, by understanding and knowledge, and weaves them to create a strong family fabric.

This fabric is prone to tearing in today’s high tech and “me first” mode of living. Man’s life and his interactions with relatives and friends are not based on intellectualism alone. They are also influenced by love and emotions. These are two crucial factors in holding a family together. These common bonds constitute a family. Without them it is but a crowd. Without love, a man can become self-centred and lose his ability to tolerate other family members. He then tries to draw attention to his individuality and this creates more problems. *Ghar Sabha* gives an individual self-esteem, a feeling of belonging, to be a fibre of the family fabric.

*Ghar Sabha* is a bridge of love between individual members of the family.

*Ghar Sabha* is a ‘school’ which educates each family member. *Ghar Sabha* is the *Satsang Sabha* of the whole family. *Satsang* moulds the individual. It sows the seeds of morality and teaches one to look within. It teaches one to look at one’s faults and

to imbibe only the good attributes of others. Devotion to God increases. One develops humility. There are untold benefits from *Satsang*. When the '*Satsang Ganga*' flows at one's doorstep, even the home becomes a *tirtha* (sacred place).

*Ghar Sabha* is the '*Ganga*' that converts a house into a *tirtha*.

### (5) How should one do the Ghar Sabha?

The *Ghar Sabha* should preferably be held in the evening after *Arti*, *Thal* and dinner. It should last for about 20 minutes. Discuss the duration with all family members. The *sabha* could be as follows :

1. *Dhun* - 2 minutes (Chanting the Swaminarayan *mantra*)
2. *Kirtan* - 4 minutes.
3. Scripture reading - 15 minutes.

With time, and as the family members become more interested and involved, the duration could be increased to 30 minutes or an hour. The shastras to be read should be light reading, such as : *The Parables of Yogiji Maharaj*, the *Satsang Kathas* of Yogiji Maharaj, the *Satsang Shikshan* examination booklets, the life histories, and *Swamini Vato*. To involve the children in the *Ghar Sabha*, they can be guided to sing *Dhun*, *Kirtans* or to read simple booklets such as *Ghanshyam Charitra*, etc.

### (6) What are the benefits of the Ghar Sabha?

*Ghar Sabha* strengthens family ties especially now that it is getting harder for parents to get together with the children, since both parents need to work to make ends meet.

Lack of communication with one's spouse can gradually lead to marriage problems. *Ghar Sabha* is an opportunity for the family to get together and discuss family problems as well. It gives cohesive support to the whole family. Sociologists call this, "Social Connectedness," which is related to individual

health as well. Recent research has shown that, the greater the Social Connectedness, the healthier the individual. A study of Japanese migrants settling in California showed that those who adopted western patterns of living(diet, smoking, relationships, etc.), showed rates of heart disease similar to their American neighbours. But a subgroup of the Japanese migrants had very low rates of heart disease, rates similar to those of their countrymen back in Japan. The researchers, Marmot and Syme noticed that members of this subgroup lived a traditional Japanese life which has social stability and emphasizes strong social ties.

When family members get together, as they may do in extended families, the health of individual members is maintained, and if a member is ill, then healing occurs. Dr. Harold Wise, calls this “therapeutic family reunion”. He believes that a great potential for healing exists in the family. He says, “for a million years people have lived in families and only in the last hundred years or so have people split up ... the oldest healing form, in tribal medicine, involved bringing the whole clan together and working things through...”. But he adds a little dishearteningly, “What I’m saying doesn’t click in most people’s heads in 20th century America !”

In *The Healing Brain*, Robert Ornstein and David Sobel reveal that, “Social support appears to offer a stability which protects people in times of transition and stress.”

The forms of social support shown by them include : intimate relationships with friends and family memberships in religious and other community organisations. *Ghar Sabha* is an example of the former and the *Satsang Sabha*, an example of the latter.

### Ghar Sabha

*“In the past, even parents used to tell stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharat. Religious education given in schools enabled religious*

*samskars to be imparted to the children. In today's environment, the parents do not care, neither is religion taught in school. So such education will not be provided outside the home environment. Therefore it is necessary for such samskars to be received at home. That is why the Ghar Sabha is needed. Children will be influenced by the environment they are brought up in. A Satsang environment at home will mould children well. A holy atmosphere will prevail in the home and in society.*

*Ghar Sabha inspires and consolidates family bonds. In today's atmosphere of materialism, each individual will come home to eat and sleep at his leisure and so family members do not meet each other. Views will differ and quarrels occur at every instant. So how can there be love and unity in the family?*

*It is not that all the family members cannot get together, but it is because we are not so resolved about doing it. If on occasions no one comes, then one should hold the Sabha alone."*

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj

## 12. Padharamani

### Home Visits by Sadhus

A tradition prevails in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya in which the sadhus visit homes of gruhastha members. This is known as the *Padharamani*. Originally established by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the ritual remains vibrant. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has performed over 2,50,000 Padharamanis during his life until failing health in his early sixties.

Occasions.

The sadhus perform Padharamani with the murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Guru Parampara, on the following occasions:

1. After Annakut, to distribute the Annakut prasad to all devotees.

2. Makar Sankranti – January 14th, to beg alms, known as *Jodi*. Standing at the doorway, the sadhus hail, “*Narayan Hare Satchidanand Prabho!*” The devotee then eagerly fills the *Jodis* (alms bag) with grain.

In both 1 & 2, two sadhus visit the homes, from about 7 a.m. to 11.30 p.m. The same routine is repeated in subsequent days until every family in the area allocated has been visited. In the few minutes that elapse during the visit, the sadhus traditionally sing Premanand Swami’s, kirtans known as *Ordana pado* :

*Aj mare orde re awia Avinashi albel...*

Welcoming God by singing His glory, the lyrics convey the devotee’s jubilation. The sadhus also inquire about their welfare and satsang and chant dhun for their well being. These personal visits are highly revered by devotees.

3. To perform *Maha Puja* to inaugurate and sanctify in a new house or business premise. This Padharamani may last from 1.5 to 2 hours. The sadhus also perform puja of all the other rooms, halls or machines, as the case may be. The devotee offers

pujan to Parmeshwar and the sadhus. The latter also imprint chandlo on the devotee and children or workers.

4. To offer Him food cooked by the devotee in a new house, and avail a meal. This is known as *Thakorji jamadwa*. The *Satsangijivanam* (4.99.31) enjoins that a minimum of 5 sadhus grace the home on such a visit.

5. To visit a devotee who is extremely ill either at home or in hospital; to boost him by praying for his recovery, by chanting the “Swaminarayan” mantra for a few minutes.

6. To perform the Antyeshti rites (ref.p.134) of a male devotee. The sadhus garland the deceased, imprint chandlo, place a new kanthi around his neck and perform arti. They then do 5 pradakshinas of the body, simultaneously chanting the Swaminarayan mantra. The sadhus then utter a few words solacing the family members. After returning to the mandir, the sadhus have a purificatory bath.

In its varied forms, the Padharamani tremendously boosts and consolidates the spiritual fervour of followers. It is both a unique tradition and a ritual in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

# 13. Utsav

(Festivals)

- Why celebrate Utsavas?
- Utsavas celebrated in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.
- The Hindu Calendar & Seasons

## Why celebrate Utsavas?

What next? A question often posed after watching the latest Oscar-winning film. People keep craving for something new, more creative and daring. Why? To relieve the stress, anxiety, moodlessness and information overload that is invariably created by modern living.

The brain yearns for new forms of entertainment and relaxation, to stimulate and to prevent it sinking into a quagmire of boredom. But do these forms really relieve the symptoms? It is rather like quicksand. The more one tries to extricate oneself, the deeper one sinks. The ancient rishis and seers were well aware of man's inherent nature of becoming bored easily, so they judiciously spangled the Hindu way of life with festivals. Celebrating festivals breaks the humdrum of daily living. It boosts man mentally and invigorates him spiritually. This leads to true contentment.

Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, Sir Monier Williams, who studied Indian Culture wrote, "No country upon Earth rejoices in a longer list of holidays (*utsava*) and seasons of rejoicing, qualified by fasts (*upavasa, vrat*), vigils (*jagarana*) and seasons of mortification than India."

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the cultural heritage of India has been transmitted, not through the annals of historical texts but through festivals. In these festivals the seers also incorporated the awareness of the fleeting nature of the human body, teaching the people to use it, while health

prevailed, to attain the ultimate goal of God-realization.

In laying injunctions about festivals, the seers also bore in mind the physical and spiritual health of man. Behavioural traits such as greed, hate, envy and jealousy, are sublimated by giving them a spiritual realm - since the *bhavnas* of most festivals are centred on devotion to God. For example, in *Vasant* (spring) and *Sharad* (post-monsoon) there is an increase in *Rajoguna* - the attribute of activity and extravagance. (ref. Ch.16). Therefore they advocated the festival of *Fuldol* (during *Vasant*) -playing with colours and coloured water. Similarly in *Sharad*, one plays *Ras* or *Garba* - Gujarati folk-dancing during *Navaratri*. Even today, in the rural areas of India, the purity and orthodoxy of the *Navaratri* festival prevail, where the sexes dance separately. In the cities, 'disco dancing' and promiscuous mixing of the sexes has vilified the traditional festival and its root *bhavana*.

A good example of the health consideration for the people, by the seers is in the sacred month of *Shravan*, during the rains. According to the Ayurvedic shastras, constantly clouded skies and high humidity dampen our digestive fire. Therefore moderation in food intake is regarded as healthful. So the seers advocated fasting by allowing only one meal a day for the householders, the *sadhus* observing stricter forms of fasting.

During the *Sharad* season, following the monsoon, although the clouds have cleared, the solar position is such that an aggravation of *pitta* (bile) occurs in the body. This can lead to fevers of various kinds. To nullify this, milk and parched rice with sugar are recommended - *dudh pauva*. This is the *prasad* offered to God on the evening of the Sharad Poonam festival.

Winter is regarded as a healthful season—when the digestive fire is at its peak. Tradition therefore advocates eating rich and nutritious foods. In Makar Sankranti (January 14th), the day of alms-giving and kite flying, people forget their grievances and jealousies and vow to work towards a harmonious life. This

is effected by giving each other sesame seed balls and jaggery. The sesame seed symbolises love and the jaggery, sweetness of speech.

Festivals also inject vigour and vitality into the cultural and religious traditions and the *bhavnas*, and prevent them from stagnation.

Through festivals, Bhagwan Swaminarayan inspired His Paramhansas and devotees to the heights of aesthetic refinement by promoting art, crafts, music and the composition of *kirtans* rich in imagery and alliteration. Nishkulanand Swami, though a poet, once made a mind-boggling ‘twelve-door’ swing during the Hindola Festival for Maharaj. Other poets like Premanand, Muktanand, Brahmanand and Devanand composed thousands of *kirtans* encompassing festivals like Ramnavmi, Fuldol, Hindola, Janmashtami, Diwali and Annakut. Continuing this tradition today, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has also boosted Indian art and crafts in the *mahotsavas* (mega festivals) in India and abroad. In the Cultural Festivals of India celebrated in London in 1985 and in Edison, U.S.A., in 1991, and the Mandir Mahotsav in London, in 1995, the artistic talents of Indian Culture peaked. The artisans constructed exquisite life-size gates, mandirs, floats and various Hindu symbols from only cane, paper pulp and chalk.

Explaining the purpose of holding *mahotsavas*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan says in Vach. Gadhada. I. 3, says,

*“I perform Vishnuyaga and, hold large congregations on festivals like Janmashtami, Ekadashi, etc. with the purpose that if anyone who attends these festivals, even if he is a sinful man, he will be redeemed and will attain the abode of God, if he recalls them on his death bed.”*

Festivals also serve another edifying purpose; the transformation of lawless and immoral members of society. Joban Pagi, a notorious bandit, and a sinner like the prostitute of Jetalpur became staunch disciples of Bhagwan Swaminarayan

after attending and participating in festivals.

Festivals also break barriers of status, caste or creed. They bring people together from various strata of society, from home and abroad to do *seva*.

In the *utsavas*, the *bhaktas* get an opportunity to do *seva* (service) and offer devotion. There are many forms of *seva* such as : providing facilities for lodging, catering, cleaning and security for the devotees. The *seva* increases the devotees' respect (*mahima*) for each other, creates bonhomie and *subridbhava* (solidarity).

Finally, the scriptural discourses (*katha*) held during these gatherings spiritually enlighten the devotees.

Regarding communal gatherings, today's medical research has begun to support them for maintenance of health and longevity of the individuals. Cultures and communities in which the individuals are introverted—who keep to themselves, become more susceptible to disease. Modern societies are becoming too organised and therefore estrange people. But, people need people to maintain health. No man is an island.

As mentioned earlier, the brain needs stimulation. “A bored brain is just as stressed, as one from information overload,” reveal Ornstein and Sobel in, *The Healing Brain*. Even a lonely monkey will do anything for the reward of sighting another monkey. In the Middle Ages, lords of castles paid high wages to a person who would live as a hermit near the castle - to display their genuine hermit! Most people left after a while, even at the risk of starvation. Apparently, the lack of social interaction proved too stressful.

People also need change. Curiosity and variation keep an individual at a mental peak. Too much of the same thing also upsets the mental equilibrium. If we eat our favourite food dish every day for a week, we wouldn't feel like touching it the following week. To counter this, the rishis incorporated festivals at regular intervals throughout the year (ref. p. 80 for chart

of Hindu months and seasons). This prevents boredom and overload. It gives the individual *bhakta* a chance to express his devotional sentiments towards God and the *Satsang*. This promotes spiritual health, brotherhood and unity in the *Satsang*. It provides the necessary stimulation and change which a *bhakta* needs for solace, which in turn keeps the community, harmonious and peaceful.

### Utsavas celebrated in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

1. Posh Sud 15 (Dec. Jan.) — *Aksbar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swami's *diksha* Day.
2. January 14 — Makar Sankranti. Festival of Alms-giving and Kite Flying.
3. Maha Sud 5 (Jan. Feb.) — Vasant Panchami - *Shikshapatri* written by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Births of Shastriji Maharaj, Nishkulanand Swami and Brahmanand Swami.
4. Maha Vad 14 (Jan. Feb.) — Maha Shivaratri - Birth of Bhagwan Shiva.
5. Fagan Sud 15 (Feb. Mar.) — Fuldol, Rangotsav (Holi) - Festival of Colours. Birth of Bhagatji Maharaj.
- \* 6. Chaitra Sud 9 (Mar. Apr.) — Shri Hari Jayanti - Birth of Shri Swaminarayan, Ramnavmi - Birth of Shri Rama.
7. Vaishakh Vad 12 (Apr. May) — Birth of Yogiji Maharaj.
8. Jeth Sud 4 (May Jun.) — HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj appointed as President of BAPS by Shastriji Maharaj.
9. Jeth Sud 10 ((May Jun.) — Bhagwan Swaminarayan returned to His divine abode - *Akshardham*.
10. Ashadh Sud 2 (Jun. Jul.) — Rath Yatra - Chariot Festival. Devotees draw the chariot of Parmeshwar through the streets.
- \* 11. Ashadh Sud 11 (Jun. Jul.) — *Deva Shayani Ekadashi* - Bhagwan Narayan retires for a four month rest.
12. Ashadh Sud 15 (Jun. Jul.) — Guru Purnima - Birth of

- Sage Vyasa – Guru is offered *pujan*.
13. Ashadh Vad 1 (Jun. Jul.) — Hindola Utsava begins -Festival of Swings, for one month.
  14. Shravan Sud 1 (Jul. Aug.) — Start of Shravan, most sacred month. Fasting starts, for one month.
  15. Shravan Sud 15 (Jul. Aug.) — Poonam. Raksha Bandhan. Sister ties a *Raksha* (*Rakhadi, Rakhi*) on her brother's wrist.
  - \* 16. Shravan Vad 8 (Jul. Aug.) — Krishna Janmashtmi - Birth of Shri Krishna.
  17. Bhadarva Vad 4 (Aug. Sep.) — Ganesh Chaturthi - *Pujan*, installing Shri Ganesh.
  - \* 18. Bhadarva Vad 11 (Aug. Sep.) — Jal Zilani *Ekadashi* - Bal Mukund & Shri Ganesh taken to an expanse of water, *pujan* offered and boat ride.
  19. Aso Sud 10 (Sep. Oct.) — Dashera - Burning the effigy of Ravana, a demon vanquished by Shri Rama.
  20. Aso Sud 15 (Sep. Oct.) — Sharad Poonam - Birth of *Aksbar Brahman* Gunatitanand Swami.
  21. Aso Vad 14 (Sep. Oct.) — Kali Chaudash - Hanuman *pujan*.
  22. Aso Vad 15 (Sep. Oct.) — Amas - Diwali - Festival of Lights; Lakshmi, Sharada *Pujan* (New account ledgers are offered *pujan*).
  23. Kartik Sud 1 (Oct. Nov.) — Hindu New Year's Day. Annakut *Utsava* - New harvest - hundreds of food dishes offered.
  24. Kartik Sud 5 (Oct. Nov.) — Labh Pancham. Business starts officially. *Pujan* offered.
  25. Kartik Sud 11 (Oct. Nov.) — *Deva-Prabodhini Ekadashi* - Bhagwan Narayan awakens following a four month rest.\*
  26. Kartik Sud 15 (Oct. Nov.) — Poonam. *Deva Diwali* - Victory of the Deities over evil. New vegetable harvest offered to Parmeshwar (*Shakotsav*).
  27. Magshar Sud 8 (Nov. Dec.) — Birth of HDH Pramukh

Swami Maharaj.

28. Magshar Vad 10 (Nov. Dec.) — Dhanurmas begins  
- Parmeshwar goes to school for one month. Writing materials, books, toys and sweets, especially *shiro*, are offered to Parmeshwar.

## The Hindu Calendar & Seasons

See following page.....

\* These are the five major fasts to be observed as *nirjalas* (waterless) in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. power, sons, etc. This also involved animal slaughter. From these offerings arose flesh-eating. The Brahmin priests considered this as *prasad* - sanctified food. The whole concept of sacrificing

animals - *Bali*, arose from deliberate misinterpretations by priests of the injunctions prescribed in the shastras. They manipulated the meaning of *Ajena* to suit their purpose. In Sanskrit *Aja* means barley, as well as a goat. Instead of using barley the priests started sacrificing goats.

*Ajena yajeta*

i.e. perform a *yagna* using barley.

The *Mahabharat* supports this:

“*Yagna* should be performed with seeds - this is the Vedic tradition. *Aja* a type of seed. Therefore it is not proper to slaughter he-goats. Wherever there is animal slaughter in the *yagnas*, that is not the way of righteous men” (*Shanti Parva* 337.4-5, 324.4-5).

The Vedas proclaim :

*Ma hinsyat sarwani bhutani.*

i.e. Do not kill any living creature.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan vehemently denounced animal sacrifices and introduced non-violent (*ahimsak*) *yagnas* in early 19th century Gujarat. He performed many such *yagnas* during the early years of His ministry by inviting thousands of Brahmin priests and pandits from all over the land, enjoining them to perform only *ahimsak yagnas*.

### The types of Yagnas and their meanings.

There are five main types of *yagnas* mentioned in the shastras:

(1) *Brahma Yagna* (2) *Pitru Yagna* (3) *Deva Yagna* (4) *Bhuta Yagna* (5) *Manushya Yagna*.

The supreme *yagna* according to the *Gita* is :

*Yagnanam japayagnosmi*

i.e. of all the *yagnas*, *Japa yagna* is the highest.

As we saw earlier in Ch. 3, *Japa* is the repeated chanting of God's name. It is also the simplest form of a *yagna* without any extensive ritual.

1. **Brahma Yagna** : Man harbours more desires than he has time to fulfil. He hankers after the ephemeral pleasures of wealth, power, and self-indulgence which all lead to pain and misery. People who reached the acme in their respective fields have either experienced discontentment, as did Michelangelo at the age of 90, or committed suicide like Ernest Hemingway. There is only unhappiness at the end of the road of materialism. Gunatitanand Swami stipulates the true goal of life to become *Akshar-rup* and then to worship Purushottam. For this, the shastras advocate *katha* and *bhakti*. This is also known as *Yog yagna*. There is bliss and contentment in listening to and extolling the divine episodes of God and His *Sadhu*.

*Brahma Yagna*, also known as *Jnan* (knowledge) *yagna*, also represents surrendering everything that the mind desires, to the Guru; to live solely according to the Guru's wishes.

The shastras also contain the prayer:

*Shivasankalpamastu mey manaba.*

i.e. Let my mind have redemptive thoughts.

Imbibing such noble thoughts is also *Brahma yagna*.

To offer and renounce the body's awareness of "I" and "mine" at the Guru's lotus feet is also *Brahma yagna*.

2. **Pitru Yagna** : *Pitru* means parents, ancestors.

Since we owe a great debt to our parents, we should serve them to the best of our ability, till their last breath.

One who does not serve or obey one's parents, invites the displeasure of God and self degradation.

To sincerely serve one's parents and to make offerings in a *yagna* for one's ancestors is known as *Pitru yagna*.

3. **Deva Yagna** : Life on earth functions smoothly because of deities such as: Varuna - of water, Indra - of rain, Ravi- sun and Chandra- moon.

Whatever we offer these deities in a *yagna*, are returned a thousand-fold. *Yagna* means 'to give'. Whenever we give, we

are performing a *yagna*. In return, the deities are appeased and they also give in return. Therefore they are also performing a *yagna*. This is known as:

*Yagnena yagnamayajanta devaha.*

i.e. to perform a *yagna* with a *yagna*.

But since man does not perform a *yagna* by destroying forests, polluting air and water, slaughtering animals for food, the result can only be drought, famine, disease and overall misery. With profound insight the rishis prescribed injunctions which naturally maintained a stable equilibrium in the Earth's ecosystem.

4. **Bhuta Yagna** : *Bhuta* means life form. Every living organism on Earth has a unique contribution to make in the ongoing universal *yagna* of life. It has its own niche in this intricate network. Therefore all the *bhutas* are inter-linked. Man's existence then is inherently dependent on the other *bhutas* and so he cannot afford to destroy or upset this delicate yet dynamic equilibrium.

Has man been able to invent a machine whose input is grass and output milk?

Has he devised a machine which takes in carbon-dioxide and water to give oxygen and energy?

These are but a few examples illustrating the great debt of *bhutas* on our lives. So it behoves upon us to conserve and look after life. This is *Bhuta yagna*. Killing cattle, fish and other animals for food is in dissonance with the *yagna bhavna* of the Hindu Dharma.

Today, at the age of 80, Pramukh Swami Maharaj unflaggingly travels the world over, performing *Bhuta yagna*, to propagate *Ahimsa* and a vegetarian diet regimen.

5. **Manushya Yagna** : *Manushya* means man. "Man is the crown of creation" is an oft heard phrase. However this crown has relegated itself to the nadir, in its egocentric thirst for power.

This has led to the production of devastating nuclear devices and cruel biological weapons, leaving a foreboding of mass genocide forever looming on our heads. Animals do not have to be reminded to live as animals. Yut man certainly has to be reminded to become a human being. The shastras say :

*Manurbhava*

(Manu Smruti)

i.e. O Man! Become human.

So the true *Manushya yagna* is to remove the baser instincts of anger, violence, cruelty, greed, and others from man to make him a human.

### Foremost Sentiment

While performing the yagna ritual itself, the officiating pandit requests the devotee offering puja materials - *abuti* to the deity, to utter *idam na mama* (इदम न मम), meaning “this is not mine” [i.e. it is Your’s]. Here then lies the significant import of Yagna. When the possessive *mama* (मम) meaning “mine” is eradicated, *Ahamkar* - ego too is destroyed. Therefore Hindu Dharma’s lofty *yagna bhavna* exhorts that man should forsake his self-centredness by giving of himself in the service of others.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj has been doing precisely this, all his life. He has been uplifting man from the depths of degradation onto the heights of ideal *bhaktas*. He has been performing the true *Manushya yagna* giving over body and soul to the service of mankind. He is living not for himself but for giving. Each second of his life is a *yagna*. Swamiji has truly imbibed the ultimate *yagna* - *Atmanivedanam*, sacrificing his *Atma* for God and mankind. He is also the living embodiment of the five types of *yagnas*.

### The Yagnas performed in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya.

Large scale *yagnas* are performed during certain festivals,

where there may be 51, 64, 100, 500 or 1000 *kunds* (fire pits). *Vishwa Shanti Yagnas* (World peace) are held during:

(1) *Murti-Prana Pratishtha* (*murti* consecration) of a *shikharbaddh* mandir.

(2) The birth anniversaries of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Guru–Pramukh Swami Maharaj. *Yagnas* are also commonly performed during Hindu marriage ceremonies, with the *Agni* (Fire) deity acting as a witness to the marriage vows (ref. Hindu marriage ceremony on pp. 129-132)

# 14. Dan

(Donation)

- Glory in the Scriptures.
- Purpose
- Types of Donations.
- Donor's Sentiments
- To whom should one donate?
- Spiritual Injunctions
- Foremost Sentiment

The rishis have enjoined factors known as *vidhi* (do's) and *nishedh* (don'ts) for man (*jivas*), which set him apart from animals. They have stipulated 20 such parameters, 10 of nishedh and 10 of *vidhey* whose observance leads an individual to be termed human. *Dan* meaning to give, is one of the *vidhey* parameters, considered as one of the most vital - *Mahaprana*, of all humane values.

Supporting this the *Mahabharat* exhorts man never to forsake the six virtues: truth, donation, activity, non-envy, forgiveness and patience: -

*Shadava tu gunaba pumsam na hatavyaha kadachana,  
Satyam danam analasyam anasuya kshama dhrutibi.*

(*Udyog Parva 33/81*)

## Glory in the Scriptures.

As well as being Hindu Dharma's eternal tradition, the shastras extol *Dan*'s glory:

- The *Rg Veda* says that in donating food or money it never decreases. On the contrary it increases. And one who does not donate experiences misery: his own wealth becomes discordant.

- The *Atharva Veda* (3/24/5/) exhorts:

*Shatabastam samahara sahasrabastam sankira.*

i.e. acquire [wealth] with a hundred hands and give away with a thousand.

- The *Isha Upanishad's* renowned first verse:

*Tena tyaktena bhunjithaha...*

proclaims that the whole Creation is a form of Parmatma, and He resides in it. So we should use everything within it as His *prasad* - grace, by dedicating to Him.

## Purpose

The Dharma Shastras cite three important reasons for dan. The foremost is to purify one's wealth. Of all types of purity, they uphold purity of wealth as the foremost. One's wealth-*Lakshmi* may arrive by various means. If that Lakshmi has been procured by evil means then it will drag away all one's savings too. This can be in the form of: medications, theft, thrifty family members, addiction, tax raid, bankruptcy and gambling.

The *Chanakyaniti Sutras* (76) echo this injunction:

*Artha toshinam shreehi parityajati*

i.e. One who procures wealth unethically and does not donate, will lose "Shree," meaning Lakshmi, wealth, honour and mundane happiness. This is aptly reflected in a colloquial maxim: *Khudaki lakdiko awaz nahi hai*. i.e. Parmeshwar's cane [of punishment] has no sound!

If one has observed purity of wealth, then such detrimental consequences do not arise. Parmeshwar Himself sees to that.

The second important purpose underlying donation is cited by the *Manu Smruti* (3/68). It reveals that the male *gruhasth* is polluted everyday by *Panchsuna* - five potential sources of sins in the home: stove, grinding stone (flour mill), (cleaning) brush, pestle and mortar and water pot. To be delivered from these sins, Manu (3/68-71) enjoins the male to perform five yagnas everyday: *Brahma, Pitru, Deva, Bhuta and Nru* (see Ch. 11). However, since this is practically difficult, Bhagwan

Swaminarayan enjoins a simple alternative in the *Shikshapatri* (147); to donate 1/10th or 1/20th of one's income to God, wherein all the five yagnas are incorporated.

Thirdly, it is incumbent for an individual to donate from that earned by sweat and intelligence, since part of it belongs to Bhagwan. The underlying reason is that during the process of earning, various divine factors have aided the individual. If one donates to a good or evil person, one receives benevolent or malevolent fruits, respectively.

However, by donating to God, or in accordance to the wishes of the Satpurush, an individual receives not material merit but *Punya* which helps him towards *moksha*. Therefore in reality, a true devotee firmly believes that the Satpurush accepts donation in order to give back infinitely more.

These sentiments are expounded in the *Bhagvatam* (10.74.24):  
*Deyam shantaya purnaya dattasya - antyamichchbata.*

i.e. he who wishes for infinite return should donate to Parmatma, who is pure, peaceful and the Atma of all creatures.

Therefore the devas enjoin:

*Dehi mey, dadami tey.*

i.e. Give me, so I can give you.

This is exemplified by *Surya Deva*, who takes water, in order to give back a thousandfold in the form of rain:

*Sahasragunam utsrushtum adatte hi rasam ravibi.*

## Types of Donations.

These can be placed into two categories:

(A) *Five Types*:

*Abhaydan* : avanting moksh - eradicating the cycle of rebirth.

Lasts for eternity, therefore is the highest form, only graced by God and God-realised sadhu.

*Vidyadan* : Imparting knowledge e.g. teaching, ceases with the person's death.

*Bhumidan* : land, for building schools, clinics, dharmashalas, mandirs. This survives till building survives.

*Annadan* : food, grain, fodder, etc.

*Dravyadan* : wealth - 3 types:

- *Shubh Lakshmi*(Auspicious) : used in home.
- *Asuri Lakshmi* (Evil) : obtained unethically e.g. gambling, lottery, etc. (see also Swatwa dosh of diet p. 151)
- *Maha Lakshmi* (Holy) - used for donation.

(B) *Three Types:*

*Rajasic* : given with mundane expectation of something in return e.g. fame, recognition or from God to improve one's lot. Also includes that given dishearteningly, and to an evil person.

*Tamsic* : given with malice and in bad circumstances.

*Sattvic* : the best form, given eagerly, without expectation of returns, to persons fit to be donated (*supatra*), at the right time and place (*Gita* 17/20-22).

- The supreme donation is *Abhaydan*, offered by the Satpurush. This is freedom from *Janma-maran* - the endless transmigratory cycle of rebirths - and graces the Jivas *Aksbardham*, Bhagwan Purushottam's divine abode.

- One important *dan* in addition to those above is *Samskaradan*. All *Shikharbaddh* and *Hari* mandirs of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya conduct spiritual activities -the foremost being *katha* - which imparts samskars to individuals of all ages while *gruhastha* devotees give *dan* in cash for the building and maintenance of these mandirs. In return, they receive samskars.

- The greatest *dan* that *gruhasthas* in the Sampradaya give is to offer their most beloved sons at the lotus feet of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj, to become *sadhus*. In the *Vachanamrutam* (*Gadhada* I.75), Bhagwan Swaminarayan reveals that by becoming a *sadhu*, the individual automatically

redeems 101\* generations in his lineage, in addition to the thousands to whom he will impart samskars during his life. Simultaneously, the parents also entertain sentiments of being graced; of being chosen by Parmatma, who gifted them a son to be raised for sadhuhood. Therein the added benefit to the parents is that they are freed of *Ahamkar* - the pride of “I” and “mine”, which acts as the “fly in the ointment” of true dan. True dan is discussed later, in the concluding remarks.

- During His time, Bhagwan Swaminarayan exhorted devotees to offer ‘donation of time’, known in the Sampradaya as *awardano dharmado*. This involved sparing time, usually one month annually to listen to Gunatitanand Swami’s *katha* in Junagadh and offer *seva* in the mandir. This tradition prevails even today in a slightly varied manner. Devotees either visit the mandirs in India annually or offer *seva* in their nearest mandir / satsang centre on weekends.

### Donor’s Sentiments

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1.11.3) enjoins the donor to entertain the following sentiments:

*Shraddhaya deyam, ashbraddhaya adeyam, shriya deyam, briya deyam, bhriya deyam, samvida deyam:*

i.e. Give faithfully, do not give unfaithfully, give magnanimously, give noble-heartedly, give by respecting the shastras, donate thoughtfully.

Additionally the shastras enjoin the donor to entertain the following three sentiments: 1) to believe one’s great fortune in being able to donate, ii) to keep it secret - ‘the left hand does not know what the right hand gives’ - is an apt maxim, and iii) to have no expectations, either from society or God - for fame, prosperity or good health. This reflects Shri Krishna’s injunction in the *Gita* (2/47), to do karma without expectation of its fruits.

This is better appreciated when we consider the infinite

grace on mankind by God Himself, such as: air, sunlight, food, water, rain, herbs, breathtaking vistas, rich mineral deposits, diamonds, gold and so forth. Yet we never come across the sign, “Made by GOD.” Whereas it is man’s shortcoming that he insists on having his name etched on memorial plates; moreso in holy shrines and tirthas, the very places that he should bow in humility rather than swagger in false pride.

The shastras reveal the profound consequences of entertaining pride or hailing one’s donation. The *Mahabharat* says that when a donor utters ‘mine’ or ‘I am giving’, the two letters मम् give rise to *Janma-maran*. Therefore sage advice to the donor is to utter *na*, न before the मम्, meaning ‘this is not mine.’ This results in eternal salvation (*Ashwamedhic Parva*, 3/1,3).

That donation which has not been covert is considered fruitless by Manu (4/237).

*Yagno-rrutena ksbarati tapaha ksbarati vismayat.  
ayurviprapavadena danam cha parikeertanat.*

i.e. pride of performing *tapas*(austerities) renders the *tapas* fruitless, maligning a brahmin or bhakta shortens one’s longevity and the *dan* made public is rendered fruitless. However, the latter injunction does not apply if the recipient discloses the *dan*.

### To whom should one donate?

Choosing an appropriate recipient when donating is vitally important. This may seem a trifle peculiar. However the Hindu shastras emphatically stipulate this. The reason is that in donating to an unsuitable person (*kupatra*) the donor may become the recipient of *pap* (sin) instead of *punya* (merit). For example, the shastras cite the story of a rich merchant donating food to a poor fisherman. The latter sold the food to buy a fishing net. With the net he killed thousands of fish for the rest of his life. The *pap* incurred transferred to the merchant!

Similarly it is natural for people to be moved on seeing a

beggar. However, it would be prudent to examine his background before donating, in case he turns out to be a gambler, alcoholic or drug abuser. Therefore the *dan* enjoined by the Satpurush rather than by one's wish becomes *nirgun*, devoid of *mayic* impressions, and results in divine fruits.

There are numerous examples in the Hindu Dharma lauding donation. The foremost is of King Bali. Though a demon, he worshipped Vishnu. When the latter, as Vaman avatar, requested for three stridfuls of land, he gladly consented. In only two strides Vaman took all his kingdom. For the third stride Bali offered his head! Pleased with such selfless sacrifice, Vishnu has been obligated to eternally remain at his door. From this act, of giving everything including himself, arose the superlative term depicting the acme of donation, *Balidan*. The word *Bali* itself has become a synonym for *dan*.

In the epic *Mahabharat*, Krishna praised Karna, a *Mahadani* - the supreme donor, much to Arjun's dislike. To demonstrate the truth of this to Arjun, Shri Krishna once requested Yudhisthir and the other Pandavas for some sandalwood to cook food. Since their sandalwood logs were wet the Pandavas refused. Shri Krishna then approached Karna. His logs too were soaked by rain. However, without second thoughts, he smashed his exquisitely decorated sandalwood door and gave the wood to Shri Krishna.

Draupadi's timely service in bandaging Shri Krishna's bleeding finger, with a strip torn from her sari, has been praised in many kirtans and glorified over the ages. When Duhshasan humiliated her in public by pulling her sari, Shri Krishna aided her by miraculously providing rolls of saris.

Shri Krishna's poverty-stricken childhood companion Sudama, was only able to gift him a handful of raw rice grains with a pure heart. Krishna instantly reciprocated by providing him a huge palace. This echoes his promise in the *Gita* (9.22),

that he who gifts God everything and constantly thinks of Him shall be cared for in every way by Him: *Yogakshemam vabanyabam*.

When Bhagwan Swaminarayan, as Neelkanth Varni, arrived in Bhatwadar, Saurashtra, a five-year-old girl lovingly offered Him milk and *rotlo*. Pleased with her sentiments, He blessed her; that He'd make her a *rani*(queen). Years later, she married Dada Khachar, the Kathi king of Gadhada. Later in His life, Bhagwan Swaminarayan eagerly accepted and relished a half-cooked *rotlo* made of *math* - a low species of pulse, offered by Jivan bhakta, a poverty-stricken devotee.

During the mid 19th century, a Muslim woodcutters's young son, Bauddin gifted a bundle of firewood to Gunatitanand Swami, who wished to warm himself one chilly winter's night in the forest. The Swami's blessings later transformed the pauper into a *Diwan* (chief Minister), of the Nawab of Junagadh. Two business partners named Mawa and Musa, ruined to destitution, lovingly gave a handful of *mamra* (inflated rice) to Swami. Soon their business revived. Today, Mawabhai's descendants continue their business in Leicester, England.

Hence the *patra* is crucially important in *dan*; the ideal being God or the God-realised sadhu.

### Spiritual Injunctions

The *Yagnavalkya Smruti* (201) advocates donation such as: cow, land, sesame seed and grains, and gold to a *supatra*: *Go-bhu-til-hiranyadi patre datavyamarchitam*.

The *Bhagvatam* (8/19/37) enjoins an individual to divide his wealth into five parts and donate one part for Dharma: *Panchadha vibhajan vittamihamutra cha modate*.

The *Danmayukh* also advocates division of income into five parts. However it enjoins using three parts for one's sustenance and two parts (40%) for Dharma!

Bhagwan Swaminarayan is more lenient. In the *Shikshapatri* (147) He exhorts devotees to donate one-tenth (10%) and for those who are very poor, one-twentieth (5%).

In India generally, a ritual of *dan* is associated with all aspects of life. However, one festival is specially ear-marked for *dan*, *Makar Sankranti* (January 14), also known as *Uttarayan*. On this day, people reverently donate grain or money to the poor and ascetics, and fodder to cattle. The underlying *bhavna* is to become less self-centred and more *vyapak* - noble-hearted like God.

Another Hindu tradition and decorum, is to offer *dan* in the form of money or foodstuffs when visiting a mandir, Guru or tirth (sacred place). In the mandir, when 'taking' Aska after Arti, devotees also ritually place some money in the Arti plate or donation box, feeling graced. In the tirth, the shastras enjoin pilgrims not to have food given as *dan*, since this nullifies the *punya* accrued by the pilgrimage. They advocate eating food from one's own finance (*Shik.*151). However Bhagwan Swaminarayan established a tradition in the Swaminarayan mandirs to give *Annadan*-food, to the needy (*Shik.*131) and *Vidyadan* - educational facilities for the poor (*Shik.*132).

He further points out in the *Vachanamrutam* (Gadhada I.34), that whatever *dukha* - misery and discord that devotees then experience, is due to laxity in observing His injunctions.

He also enjoins them to offer *dan* after an eclipse (*Shik.*87) and to Brahmins during festivals (*Shik.*156). He has even thought of widows, instructing them not to donate for Dharma if their savings are only sufficient for their existence (*Shik.*167).

An eternal and ennobling ritual of the Hindu Dharma, *Dan* has been highly venerated and devotionally imbibed over the ages. Whether individuals offer *Dan* for purity of wealth, the good of others and *pitrus*, for *moksha*, it is the underlying sentiments rather than the nature of the *dan*, that is important.

Hearteningly, Shri Krishna proclaims in the *Gita* (9.26) that he eagerly accepts anything offered lovingly, even leaves. Therein he offers a light at the end of the 'samsara tunnel' for everyone, including the poor and sinful, to elevate themselves spiritually, to 'samskarise' themselves.

### Foremost Sentiment

For the novice, this is the primary level of Dan, of giving physical objects. The true bhakta striving on the highest spiritual realm, considers his every possession as God-given and rightfully His. He, the bhakta, likens himself merely as an 'interim,' a 'bank cashier' while Parmatma remains the *malik* - owner. The bhakta's true Dharma and Bhakti is *Atmanivedanam*, to implicitly offer everything, including his Atma at the lotus-feet of Parmatma. This is also known as *Ananya Sharnagati* - unalloyed refuge at His lotus-feet.

If the bhakta thinks even for a moment, that "he is donating," then this is a great flaw in his devotion, for this boosts his *Ahamkar* - ego of "I" and "mine." With "I" insidiously creeping in, Ananya Sharnagati is marred. In essence nullified. Therefore the highest and final endeavour is to eradicate the subtlest vestiges of Ahamkar. This is effected by pleasing the Satpurush. The self purified, he, the pure Atma offers himself at the lotus-feet of Parmatma. This Ananya Sharnagati is his true and final Dan. Final, because transmigration ceases.

### Gita's Sentiments of Dan

The act of offering is Brahman,  
the material offered is Brahman,  
the recipient is Brahman,  
the donor is Brahman.,

(4/24)

# 15. Maanta

## What is Maanta ?

'Maanta' means to pledge or observe a religious vow, to as a way of praying to Bhagwan to overcome a problem in life or just for gaining spiritual merit (*punya*)

## Forms of Maanta

Devotees pledge to visit *tirths* (sacred places and shrines) usually by observing some physical hardship, such as by walking (some barefooted), *gabard yatra* - rolling on the road or doing *dandvats* all the way! During the journey, some observe *ektana* - eating one meal a day, some do *farar* - eating farari foods and some observe a complete fast if the journey takes only a day or two.

Pilgrimage by walking to : Ambaji (north Gujarat), Shri Nathji (Rajasthan), Dakor, Amarnath & Vaish. Devi in Himalayas, Kedarnath, Yamunotri, etc.

(2) Fasting, as above. Some may observe avoiding sweets or ghee until their pledge has been fulfilled. Some observe *dharmaparna* - eating on alternate days only, for 1 month during Shravan or *Chaturmas* (4 months of monsoon) or even longer periods.

(3) Offering alms to ascetics and pilgrims in *maths* and *tirths*.

## Maanta in BAPS Sanstha.

(1) Devotees offer *mahapuja* or *pradakshin* a of Akshar Deri, the miraculous shrine in Gondal. Mahapuja is also performed in all *shikharbaddh* mandirs.

(2) Some do *abhishek* of Neelkanth Varni at the Bharuch mandir with the holy water from the nearby Narmada.

(3) Draping a woollen shawl on Pramukh Swami Maharaj's image at the mandir in Yagnapurush pol in Amdavad.

(4) Do an extra number of mala.

(5) Chant the *Janmangal Namavali* - 108 divine names of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

### Types of Problems

For chronic and painful illnesses, to beget offspring, for overcoming poverty, to overcome an undesirable *swabhav* (behaviour) such as anger, hate, jealousy, *lobh*, taste etc., to progress in studies or pass an upcoming exam or interview, etc.

Maanta is a self-chosen pledge to offer extra devotion to Bhagwan and please Him and the Satpurush, in return for deliverance from the ups and downs in daily life.

# 16. Tirth Yatra

(Pilgrimage)

- Purpose of Tirth Yatra.
- Origin of Tirths.
- Types of Tirths.
- Preparations for Yatra.
- Rituals at the Tirth.
- Maha Kumbh Mela.
- Ultimate Yatra.

*Tirth* means a sacred place. In Sanskrit, tirth is that 'embankment' which guides us out of the *samsara* ocean. *Yatra* means a journey. Hence a *Tirth Yatra* is a pilgrimage.

## Purpose of Tirth Yatra.

The aspirant may embark on a yatra for one or more of the following reasons:

- for cleansing sin,
- for *prayashchitta* – atonement for an unmeritorious act,
- *Pitru Tarpan* - offering *Pindadan* and prayers for the spiritual transcendence of the departed forefathers.
- To sprinkle a deceased relative's ashes in a holy river.
- To have darshan of ancient mandirs or miraculous shrines.
- For consolidating faith, devotion to and glory of the Divine.

The tirths also serve as important factors in promoting cross-cultural ties, consolidating national unity. For example, *yatriks* - pilgrims, from one part of India visit tirths in other parts and vice versa. People too, carry the holy water from the Ganga for *abhishek* on Shri Shankar's murti in the south, in Rameshwar. Adi Shankar established a unique legacy vibrant even today, of appointing *pujaris* from one part of India for duty in another. Priests from Rameshwar were chosen to serve in Badrinath, and from Dwarka to Jagannath Puri and vice

versa. This boosted solidarity in a land of multiple dialects and sub-cultures.

### Origin of Tirths

Tirths are classified as either *Swayambhu* – self-forming, by Divine intent, or *Nirmit* - created by holy personages. The 12 *Jyotirling*s representing Shri Shankar, are examples of the former (see table on p.101).

The *Garud Puran* defines a *Tirth* as, “*That holy spot which is associated with or habited by sadhus deserving reverence, who are without desires or delusion and who have cleansed their sins by performing tapas.*”

The *Mahabharat* says:

“*Just as certain parts of the body are purer than others, so are certain places on earth more sacred; some on account of their situation, some due to their sparkling waters and others because of the association with saintly people.*”

(*Anushasan Parva* 108.16-18)

The phenomenon of a place attaining sacredness can be better understood by the following analogies and phenomena:

1) When visiting an historical site, for example, the field of the battle at Haldighati. Empathising with Rana Pratap, thoughts arise in one’s mind, of fighting patriotically for the motherland. The thought arising will coincide with the nature of the historical background of the area.

2) An earthly material, such as a radioactive element. If such a material has the inherent property of emitting radioactivity for thousands of years, then a place associated with a pure sadhu who emanates spiritual vibrations can certainly attain ‘divine activity,’ whose ‘half-life’ may depend on the sadhu’s divinity or on the arrival later, of a similar personage who recharges it.

This concept of tirths being revived is cited in the *Bhagvatam* (1.13.10): “It is they [sadhus] who sanctify Tirths by their visits,

as they carry within their hearts the mace-bearing Vishnu.” People will certainly feel peaceful here. Moreover, thoughts of moksha and spiritual cleansing will arise naturally from within.

3) In their book *Superlearning* (1979), Ostrander and Schroeder aver that the body’s pranic stream is affected by emotions, food, drink, sound and music. In considering the latter, it is universally experienced that music alters moods. Music of certain beats also induces healing and accelerates learning. However Hindu Dharma is replete with examples of more profound phenomena induced by certain forms of music which affect animals and transform the surroundings of an area. Examples of the former include the famous contests between Tansen, the bard at Akhbar’s court and Baijubavra of Gujarat.

An example of the effect on nature concerns Premanand Swami, an exuberant poet Paramhansa of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. Maestros from Gwalior once visited Him and prided themselves in their exceptional music talents. He then requested Swami to sing the *Bhairavi rag*, in the evening! This *rag* is only meant to be sung in the morning. As Swami began to sing devotionally, a cool wind suddenly began blowing through the darbar and birds chirped and twittered raucously, all factors heralding sunrise! Therefore, just as music by saintly people can affect the environment and spiritual consciousness of listeners, then a holy sadhu can imbue sacredness to a place.

4) Every organism and inanimate object possesses an intrinsic vibration. Researchers have observed this using Kirlian photography, ascribing to the vibrations names such as: aura, force field, electromagnetic field, etheric body, astral body, pranic field and chi. In living organisms, this aura is enhanced by pranayama, yoga and music of a certain beat. If such physical parameters are capable of strengthening the aura, a yogi or sadhu who has awakened his Kundalini or attained rapport with the Universal Energy will certainly possess and radiate

some form of energy. This energy then permeates any area he visits, inducing vibrations which nullify the discordant, *mayic* vibrations of the area itself. Examples abound in the Hindu shastras illustrating the alteration of consciousness of an organism by such a manner. Within a 300 *gaun* radius of Lomash rishi's ashram, carnivora lost their killing instinct, enabling their prey to roam about fearlessly. Similarly, after Neelkanth Varni (Bhagwan Swaminarayan) mastered Ashtang Yoga from Gopal Yogi in the Himalayas, some shepherds requested Him to do something about the carnivora which regularly killed and ate their cows. Moved by their plight, He requested Gopal Yogi to blow his conch shell. Henceforth wild animals never entered the vicinity of the sound vibrations produced by the conch shell.

Therefore it is not surprising that people who visit tirths experience these spiritual vibrations and feel peaceful, solaced and boosted. To cite one example, people experience this in *Uttarakhand* – the sacred shrines and rivers in the Himalayan foothills, commencing at Haridwar and Rishikesh. In addition to the tirths, this phenomenon also stems from the collective spirituality accrued over aeons by generations of yogis performing penances in this region.

In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, an example of a tirth being formed by sadhus' divinity is the *Akshar Deri*. This miraculous shrine is housed on the ground floor *mandapam* of the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Gondal, not far from Rajkot. Firstly, Shastriji Maharaj, the third spiritual successor of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, constructed and consecrated the shrine on the cremation site of Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami, the choicest devotee and abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The second equally important factor, is that Yogiji Maharaj, the fourth successor performed its puja for 40 years! Little wonder that the collective divinity has rendered Akshar Deri a profoundly divine tirth.

## Types of Tirths

These are of two types: *Sthavar* – stationary and *Jangam* – mobile. Examples of the latter include: incarnations, God-realised sadhu or satpurush. Examples of Sthavar tirths are detailed below:

### *Sthavar Tirths of Bharat*

Sthavar Tirths	Examples	In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya
12 Jyotirlingas (Self-formed Mahadevas). Forms of Shiva.	Somnath (Gujarat), Mahakaleshwar (Ujjain, M.P.), Kedarnath (Himalayas), Kashivishwanath (Kashi, U.P.), Rameshwar (Tamil Nadu), Mallikarjun (T.N.), Omkareshwar (Amareshwar, M.P.), Bhimeshwar (Maha.), Trambakeshwar (Maha.), Vaidyanath (Bengal), Nageshwar (nr. Dwarka, Gujarat), Ghumeshwar (nr. Ellora, A.P.).	
Mountains	Himalayas, Kailas (Tibet), Girnar (Saurashtra), Pavagadh (Gujarat), and others.	
Five Lakes	Manasarovar (Tibet), Pampasarovar (S.India), Pushkar Sarovar (Rajasthan) Bindu Sarovar (Siddhpur, N.Gujarat), Narayan Sarovar (Kachchh).	
Kunds (Hot springs)	Gauri Kund (Himalayas) and others	
Rivers	Ganga, Yamuna, Saryu, Narmada, Sindhu, Kaveri, Tapi, Mahi, Godavari and others.	Ghela (Gadhada), Und (Bhadra), Gondali (Gondal)
Kshetras (fields):	Kurukshetra (site of Gita, Haryana), Naimisharanya (U.P.), Prabhas (Gujarat).	

Trees	Akshay Vat (Allahabad (U.P.) Bodhi Vruksh (Bodh Gaya, Bihar) Kabir Wad (Bharuch, Gujarat), Khijda Vruksh (Jamnagar).	3 Neem Trees – 2 in Lakshmi Wadi, 1 in Dada Khachar's Darbar, Peepal Tree, on R. Und, Bhadra.
Birth places	Ayodhya (Shri Rama's), Mathura (Shri Krishna's), Chhapiya (Bhagwan Swaminarayan's).	Bhadra: Aksharbrahman Gunatitanand Swami Mahuva: Bhagatji Maharaj Mahelav: Shastriji Maharaj Dhari: Yogiji Maharaj Chansad: Pramukh Swami Maharaj
Mandirs	Four "Dhams" – Rameshwar, Badrinath, Jagannath Puri, Dwarka. Tirupati (Tamil Nadu), Shreenathji (Rajasthan) and others.	The 6 built by Shri Swaminarayan & all those by Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj & Pramukh Swami.

## Preparations for Yatra

Before embarking on a yatra, the shastras enjoin several important observances. These are poetically versified in the *Harililamrutam* (1.19.47-57):

- Know the glory of the tirth. Therein the yatrik gains knowledge (jnan) and from this springs forth bhakti. Only then does he gain fruit of the yatra. Explaining this, the *Narad Puran* points out that fish and other creatures live in the waters of a holy river or lake, as do birds on the shrines. Yet lacking devotional faith, despite living in a tirth, they gain no fruit. Therefore the proper *bhava* (sentiments) in approaching a tirth is important.

Towards this end, the *Skand Puran* advocates ridding oneself of all impure thoughts.

- Offer food to sadhus and bhaktas before setting off and after returning, to increase the punya of the yatra.

- Carry one's own foodstuffs to cook food along the way and at the tirth. Donation and alms should not be accepted. Otherwise this nullifies the punya gained.

- To walk barefooted to the tirth, known as *pad yatra*. There are two variations of this: *dandvat yatra* and *gabad yatra*. The latter involves rolling on the ground! The greater the suffering and hardship, the greater the merit. Tibetan pilgrims visiting Manasarovar do so by trundling on hands and knees. Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, roads and vehicles have provided safety and eased yatras, though some mountain spots such as Kedarnath, Vaishno Devi and Manasarovar still remain inaccessible by vehicles. At best, *khachars* – a species of mule, and doolies – a type of palanquin carried by porters, are available for the old and infirm.

Yatras were considered extremely meritorious, since people had to be fit and spiritually committed to brave the potential hazards along the way, of: looters, wild animals, inclement weather, treacherous river crossings and landslides. It was not uncommon for yatriks to perish along the way. Therefore yatriks tended to travel in groups. Even so, the danger of wild fauna remained. In his *Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, Jim Corbett cites the terrifying ordeal of the 60,000 pilgrims who trudged on the pilgrim route to Badrinath from Rudraprayag, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1918 to 1926, a man-eating leopard claimed 124 victims, many being dragged out of pilgrim shelters and houses!

From this, one can appreciate Bhagwan Swaminarayan's astonishing feat during His seven-year *kalyan-yatra*, having setoff alone, at the tender age of eleven! (ref. pp.)

- Offer obeisance to any tirth enroute. This increases the merit of the whole yatra.

- The householder should ideally be accompanied by his wife and children.

- Practice self-control and self-abnegation, such as: observing brahmacharya, having only one meal a day, sleeping on the floor, listening to katha, not wasting even a moment roaming

aimlessly, refraining from doing business and avoiding visits to other places nearby, which are not sacred.

- Avoid committing sinful acts during the yatra and at the tirth, for the *Skand Puran* stipulates:

*Anyakshetre krutam papam teerthakshetre vinashyati,  
Teerthakshetre krutam papam vajralepo bhavishyati.*

i.e. the *pap* committed elsewhere is destroyed at the tirth, but that committed at the tirth becomes imperishable.

### Rituals at the Tirth

Yatriks usually observe the following rituals at a tirth. The sentiment underlying the majority of these is the yatrik's spiritual edification:

- *Snan* – bathing – if kund, river, lake or ocean. With the exception of a naked order of ascetics known as *Nagas*, Hindus bathe in tirths with clothes, since a river, and water itself represents a deity. The largest snan ritual in the Hindu Dharma occurs during the Kumbh Mela. (See box pp. 106-7)

Further, if the yatrik recalls any of his relatives while bathing, the latter receive one-eighth of his punya.

- *Mundan* – the males have their heads shaved, symbolising humility and sharnagati – surrenderance. Women may have their braids cut “two-finger breadths.”
- *Darshan* – of murtis, sadhus and other yatriks.
- *Puja* – worship ritual of the murti, shrine or spot.
- *Japa* – mantra chanting in the form of *dhun* or mala.
- *Dhyan/Prarthna* – meditation and prayer.
- *Katha* – listening to scriptural discourses
- *Pradakshina/Parikrama* : of the shrine. Circumambu-lating a mountain, lake or river is known as *Parikrama*. The sheer faith of Hindu yatriks performing parikramas can be gleaned by the distances and hence the duration involved:

## Yatra Parikrama distance Duration Height

Mt.Kailas : 48 km. 3-4 days 20,000 ft.

Manasarovar : 95 km. 4-5 days 15,800 ft.

Mt.Girnar : 36 km. 2-3 days —

River Narmada : 2,560 km. Over 1 year —

- *Dan* – offering alms or money – to the deity, sadhus and poor.
- *Shraaddh vidhi* – puja ritual for the spiritual betterment of ancestors.
- *Asthi visarjan* – sprinkling ashes of a deceased in the water.
- *Vrat-upavas* - fasting, having frugal meals or *farar*.
- *Yagna (Homa)* – fire ritual with mantras and offerings.
- Permanent residence – by aged or retired individuals, who wish to spend the rest of their lives in spiritual pursuit. Kashi, Mathura and the banks of the Ganga are common choices. It is also considered highly meritorious to die in a tirth.

## Maha Kumbh Mela

*In terms of sheer religious fervour, faith and participation, the Maha Kumbh Mela is the greatest spiritual phenomenon in the world. It is celebrated every 12 years on Mauni Amavasya, in Haridwar, Prayagraj(Allahabad), Ujjain and Nasik, depending on particular astronomical combinations. The 42 day Kumbh Mela 2001, from 9th Jan to 21st February in Prayagraj was at the confluence – Triveni Sangam – of three sacred rivers; Ganga, Yamuna and the underground Sarasvati.*

*Over 30 million pilgrims from all over the world, including the largest gathering of Hindu ascetics gathered here for ritual bathing, to purify themselves.*

### Origin

*The Garud Puran (I.240.26-28) and other Hindu texts cite the story of the Kumbh (pitcher).*

*Once the sage Durvasa visited Indra in Amravati, the capital of his*

*abode. He honoured Indra with a garland of 'never-wilting' flowers. Indra passed it to Airavat, his seven-trunked elephant, who crushed it under his feet. Offended, the enraged Durvasa cursed Indra, stripping him of all his wealth and possessions. This weakened the devas. Shri Vishnu, the sustainer of the universe, advised Indra to attain Amrut, the divine nectar to regain power. To procure this from the depth of the ocean, the devas and danavas(demons), though arch enemies, banded together. Thus ensued the Samudra Manthan, churning of the ocean. From this sprung forth 14 ratnas(gems). One of them was Shri Vishnu in the form of Bhagwan Dhanvantari - the divine healer – with an Amrut Kumbh. Both the devas and demons scrambled for this Kumbh. However, Dhanvantari passed it on to Garud, Vishnu's heavenly vehicle, to take it to Swarg(heaven). In hot pursuit, the demons arrested Garud's flight forcing it to place the Kumbh down in four places:*

*Prayagraj,  
Haridwar,  
Ujjain  
and Nasik.*

*The Amrut that spilled in these places sanctified them eternally. The flight spanned 12 days, equivalent to 12 human years. Hence the Maha Kumbh is celebrated every 12 years.*

*Glory*

*The punya gained by bathing at Prayagraj during the month of Magh is described in the Mahabharat as being equivalent to that obtained by fasting for 100 years. This is known as Kalpwas.*

## **Ultimate Yatra**

Traversing the *samsara yatra* – pilgrimage of life, is the ongoing endeavour of an aspirant. Towards this end spiritual endeavours such as: tapas, yagna, dan, tirth yatra, scriptural study and so forth are essential. These purify him and consolidate his faith and devotional zeal. However the ultimate endeavour and goal, is to transcend *samsara* by realising Parmatma. This

is only possible by recourse to the *Jangam tirth* – the Satpurush. The mystic and poet Narsinh Mehta, lauds the glory of such a sadhu in his famous verse:

*Prana thaki mune vaishnava va'la...*

*Adsath tirath mara santne charane, koti Ganga, koti Kashi re...*

i.e.[God says] “The sadhu is dearer to me than my heart...

The 68 tirths reside at his feet, his glory surpasses ten million Gangas and ten million Kashis.”

Similarly, Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s Paramhansa-poet, Muktanand Swami exhorts:

*Kashi Kedar ke Dwarka dode, jogani jukti na jani re,*

*Fera farine pachho gharno gharma, godho jodano jem ghani re..*

i.e. even if the aspirant visits Kashi, Kedarnath or Dwarka, if he does not realise the manifest – *pragat* – form of God, his efforts lead nowhere, just as an ox turns the grinding mill (walking all day in a circular motion), yet he remains in the same spot.

In the *Bhagvatam*, Shri Krishna too puts all spiritual endeavours into perspective, revealing the most effective:

*Na rodbhayati mam yogo na samkhyā dharma eva cha,*

*Na swadhyayastapasyago neshtapurtam na dakshina.*

*Vratani yagnashchbandamsi teerthani niyama yamaha,*

*Yathavarundhe satsangaha sarvasangapaho hi mam.*

(Bhagvatam 11.12.1,2)

i.e. Ashtang yoga, Samkhya (system of philosophy), Vedic study, tapas, renunciation, offerings in the sacred fire, beneficial deeds for society such as digging wells and planting trees, donation, fasting, yagnas, chanting mantras, tirth yatras and observing major and minor spiritual injunctions do not please me, as does Satsang.

And Satsang denotes association with the Satpurush. However, Shri Krishna’s injunction does not in any way preclude observance of the above endeavours. It only means

that if the aspirant performs them of his own volition, he will accrue fruits which lead to moksha after a long span of time – *urukale* (*Bhagvatam* 10.84.11). Whereas by implicitly obeying the Satpurush and developing *Atmabuddhi* (one-ness) with him, the gates of moksha will open readily. [*Bhagvatam* 3.29.20].

Thus the aspirant, having traversed the *samsara* yatra, attains the final goal, the lotus-feet of Parabrahman. This is the ultimate tirth yatra.

*“Times there will be, a-many, when, gasping for breath, you toil up the face of steep mountains on feet torn and bleeding by passage over rough rocks, sharp shale, and frozen ground, when you will question whether the prospective reward you seek is worth the present price you pay in suffering; but being a good Hindu you will toil on, comforting yourself with the thought that merit is not gained without suffering, and the greater the suffering in this world, the greater the reward in the next.”*

– Jim Corbett

*The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*

# 17. Shraaddh

## What is Shraaddh?

Shraaddh is a ritual of offering food to the *pitrus* for the spiritual beneficence of the departed. The *Pitrus*-Vasus, Rudras and Adityas are deities of *Shraaddh*. They are gratified by the offerings, which they pass on to human ancestors. Respectively, the three deities represent the father, paternal grandfather and paternal great-grandfather (*Manu III/284*).

## Belief

The act of offering rice balls to the three ancestors necessarily requires that, in an ethereal body they are still able to enjoy the *tanmatra*-essence-of the rice balls, years after demise. The *pitrus* being pleased, then bestow on their living descendants, longevity, knowledge, prosperity and *moksh* (*Agni Puran 163/41-42*).

A question then arises, of how food offered to a brahmin is availed of by departed *jivatmas* ?

Here lies the beauty of Sanatan Dharma's philosophy. The answer is that Vedic mantras chanted with faith convey the offerings made to the *pitrus* :

*Shraddhaya yat kriyate tat shraddham*

i.e. that which is performed with faith is called *Shraaddh*.

It is believed that the *jivatma* of a deceased does not leave the vicinity of his house for twelve days (*Matsya Puran 18/5-7*). After cremation, the *jivatma* attains a *vayavya* body. Prayer is offered to Agnidev-the deity of fire, to take the *jivatma* to Vishnu (*Rg Ved. X/15/3*). In the world of *pitrus*, the departed *atma* enjoys food offered in *shraaddh* with the utterance of the word "svadhā" (*Vishnudharmasutra 20.34-36*).

The Kurma Puran states that on *Amas*, the darkest and moonless day of the Hindu lunar month, *pitrus* assume the

*vayavya* body and arrive at the doorstep of their homes. Here they long to see whether their descendants are offering *shraaddh*. They remain till sunset. If nothing is offered, then hungry and thirsty, they depart solemnly. Faith is the most important factor of *shraaddh*. *Shraddhā* (faith), from which the word *shraaddh* is derived, is the most important factor of *shraaddh* (*Skand Puran VI.218.3*). One entertains firm faith, that which is given to the brahmin for the departed will reach him or them.

It is said that just as a calf finds its own mother from among a herd of cows, so the mantras uttered in *shraaddh* carry the food to the pitrus.

## Types of Shraaddh

There are four main types:

- 1 *Sapindikaran* – Performed after the antyeshti samskars, to propitiate father, grandfather and great grandfather.
- 2 *Ekodishtha* – performed once a year on the death *tithi* of the parents. Swaminarayan followers observe this by offering food to Bhagwan at their chosen shikharbaddh mandir.
- 3 *Pārvanshrāddh* – performed on an auspicious day or festival, for fulfilling mundane desires.
- 4 *Vrūddhishrāddh* – performed during a yagna, vivah, murti pratishtha, yagnopavit, samaavartan, garbhaadaan, pumsavan, simant, jatkarma and at samnyas diksha.

Of the above, the most meritorious is one in which one's Ishtadev is offered food everyday. The shastras stipulate that the family from which a person has become a sadhu, has performed all *shraaddh*. This is because his whole life is spent in bhakti and *paropkar* (for the good of others). One hundred and one generations of such a person are uplifted (Vach. Gadhada I-75 - -).

## Time

The dark half-*Krishna paksh* of Bhadarva is considered appropriate for *pitru shraaddh*, when the sun is in the middle of *dakshinayan*, in the *kanya rashi* (*virgo zodiac*).

Twelve days after the ritual impurity of death, on the 13th, *shayyādān* is performed. In this, fruits, clothes and Kapila cow are given to a brahmin or a mandir.

Bhadarva vad 13 is considered especially auspicious for pitru shraaddh. In Gaya and other holy places, any *tithi* is considered auspicious except 14th. For a person who has died by a weapon or injury, *Shurapura shraaddh* is performed on the 14th.

The most appropriate time for shraaddh according to the Manu Smruti (3.278) is in *aparahan* – after midday.

During Bhadarva, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha observes shraaddh as a form of bhakti, rather than mourning, of: Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Bhaktimata on vad 10, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami and Bhagatji Maharaj on vad 13, Shastriji Maharaj on vad 4 and Yogiji Maharaj on vad 12.

Householders of BAPS annually observe shraaddh (Ekodishta cited above) of their parents, by donating money to the shikharbaddh mandir of their choice. From this donation, food is offered to Thakorji, on the days of the parents' demise. The family members then partake of this prasad.

## Offerings and Rituals.

Usually *pinds* (balls) of cooked rice flour are offered to three brahmins. The three represent the three ancestors described above. Lentils, wheat, barley, sesame, milk, ghee and donation of wealth earned lawfully, also please the pitrus for a long period. *Kbir* – sweet boiled milk with rice, is also an important offering. Those who are poor may offer *shāk sbrāddh* – just vegetables. If unable to afford this, they may offer grass to a cow. If still more destitute, a person may just raise his hands high, in supplication

to the pitrus and offer prayerful sentiments.

## Place

The fruits of shraaddh are considered indestructible (*akshay*) if performed in: Gaya, Prayag, Prabhas, Pushkar, Kashi, Ganga, Yamuna and Narmada (*Shankhsmruti* 14.27-29). A mother's shraaddh is performed in *Matru Gaya* – meaning Siddhpur, in north Gujarat. This is because Kapil Muni performed his mother Devhuti's shraaddh in Bindu Sarovar, Siddhpur. Shraaddh is to be performed in a pure area, facing south, smeared with cow dung. "Pure" areas include holy places, banks of rivers, mountains and forests (*Brahma Puran* 220.5-7)

Proximity of sacred places nearer home induce people to choose these, in preference to those in distant places. For example, people in Saurashtra and north Gujarat often perform shraaddh on the seashore at Somnath. Some choose Vautha, a place near Dholka, situated on the confluence of seven rivers. Those living south of Amdavad perform shraaddh in Chanod, on the banks of the Narmada. James Forbes, a colonial visitor who lived near Chanod for four years, observed in his *Oriental Memoirs*, in 1781, "No place in the western provinces of Hindostan is reputed so holy as Chandode; none at least exceed it; its temples and seminaries almost vie with the fanes of Jaggernaut and colleges of Benares" (1988 III:6).

People in Madhya Pradesh prefer the holy river Shipra at Ujjain. In the BAPS Swaminarayan Sampraday, devotees perform shraaddh in the nearest shikharbaddh mandir, and later, on the banks of the sacred rivers - Ghela in Gadhada and Gondli in Gondal.

# 18. Sixteen Samskars

(Sacraments)

- Purpose of Samskars
- Bhagwan Swaminarayan & Samskars
- Pre-natal Samskars
- Childhood Samskars
- Educational Samskars
- Marriage Samskars

Eight Types of Marriages

Hindu Marriage Sentiments

Concept of Equality

Concept of Atma in Marital Discord

The Marriage Ceremony

- Death Samskars

In Calamities

Antyeshti Samskars of Ascetics

Although the numbering of samskars prescribed by various shastras vary, the sixteen below are a consensus among scholars.

- Pre-natal Samskars
  - (1) *Garbhadhan* (Conception)
  - (2) *Pumsavan* (Engendering a male issue)
  - (3) *Simantonnayan* (Hair-parting)
- Childhood Samskars
  - (4) *Jatakarma* (Birth rituals)
  - (5) *Namakaran* (Name-giving)
  - (6) *Nishkramana* (First outing)
  - (7) *Annaprashan* (First feeding)
  - (8) *Chudakarma* (Chaul) (Shaving of head)
  - (9) *Karnavedh* (Piercing the earlobes)
- Educational Samskars
  - (10) *Vidyarambha* (Learning the alphabet)

(11) *Upanayana* (Sacred thread initiation)

(12) *Vedarambha* (Beginning Vedic study)

(13) *Keshant* (Godan) (Shaving the beard)

(14) *Samavartan* (End of studentship)

- **Marriage Samskara**

(15) *Vivaha* (Marriage Ceremony)

- **Death Samskara**

(16) *Antyeshti* (Death rites).

Since eternity man has strived to upgrade his life. This awareness, unique only to mankind, has led him to think deeper about his physical, mental and spiritual well being. Towards this end, the Vedic seers prescribed a set of observances known as *Samskars*. (Though pronounced *Sanskaras* in Gujarati, we shall use the original Sanskrit form.)

The nearest English word for samskara is sacrament. The Oxford English Dictionary defines sacrament as “a religious ceremony or act regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward or spiritual grace.” In classical Sanskrit literature texts, such as *Raghuvamsha*, *Kumarsambhava*, *Abhijnan-Shakuntal*, *Hitopadesha* and *Manu Smruti*, samskara is used to mean: education, cultivation, training, refinement, perfection, grammatical purity, polishing, embellishment, decoration, a purificatory rite, a sacred rite, consecration, sanctification, effect of past actions (karmas) and merit of karmas.

A general definition of samskara, encompassing nearly all of the above is “to improve upon something while removing its undesirable attributes.”

## Purpose of SamskAras

- **Cultural.** The variety of rites and rituals related to the samskars help in upgrading a person. In the *Parashar Smruti* it is said, “Just as a picture is painted with various colours, so the character of a person is formed by undergoing various samskars.”

Thus, the Hindu sages realised the need of consciously guiding and moulding the character of individuals, instead of letting them grow in a haphazard manner.

- **Spiritual.** According to the seers, samskars impart a higher sanctity to life. Impurities associated with the material body are eradicated by performing samskars. The whole body is consecrated and made a fit dwelling place for the Atma. According to the *Atri Smruti* a man is born a *Shudra*; by performing the Upanayana Samskara he becomes a *Dviija* (twice born); by acquiring the Vedic lore he becomes a *Vipra* (an inspired poet); and by realising Brahman he becomes a Brahmin. The samskars are a form of spiritual endeavour (*sadhana*) – an external discipline for internal spiritual edification. Thus, the entire life of a Hindu is one grand sacrament. The *Isba Upanishad* reveals that the final goal of the samskars, by observing the rites and rituals is, “to transcend the bondage of *samsara* and cross the ocean of death.” To this we can add that after transcending the cycle of births and deaths, the *Atma* attains *Paramatma* – Bhagwan Purushottam. Therefore in essence the sixteen samskars commence with and use the physical, outer body to transform the *Atma* within.

- **Bhagwan Swaminarayan & Samskars.** In the *Vachanamrutam*, Bhagwan Swaminarayan defines the goal of a Jiva as realising Ekantik Dharma, which comprises four factors: Dharma, Jnan, Vairagya and Bhakti. Defining each of these factors in the *Shikshapatri*, He prescribes practical tenets to be observed by followers to realise Ekantik Dharma. These tenets are also a form of samskars, since they consecrate the individual. They include those which maintain body purity, such as: bathing daily, purity of diet by eschewing meat and intoxicants, and wearing decent clothing. Tenets which ‘samskarise’ the mind and Jiva include: fasting on auspicious days, *dan*, *tirth yatra*, *puja*, avoiding – evil company, theft, suicide, homicide, adultery

and gambling, observing religious *utsavas* and *prayashchitta* – atonement, performing yagnas, visiting mandirs, scriptural study and singing kirtans extolling the glory of God. In essence, the latter are forms of *Navdha Bhakti*.

However, the highest samskara and His foremost injunction (verse 116), enjoins an individual to identify his Atma– above the three bodies– with Aksharbrahman and offer bhakti to Bhagwan Purushottam. Since Swaminarayan philosophy believes the physical body composed of the *Panch Bhutas* as real, and not *mithya* – illusory, as believed by some schools of philosophy, a person endeavours to use this as an instrument, to ‘samskarise’ himself to attain a divine body. When this is achieved, it is known as realising Ekantik Dharma. This is the final samskara and the ultimate fruit too, according to Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

- The 16 Samskars are also performed in the Prana Pratishtha ritual of murtis consecrated in a new mandir.

## Pre-natal Samskars

### (1) *Garbbadban* (Conception)

*Garbha* means womb. *Adhan* means placing. In this the man places his seed in a woman. The *Grubhasutras* and *Smritis* advocate special conditions and observances for this, to ensure healthy and intelligent progeny. Procreation of children was regarded as necessary for paying off debts to the forefathers. Another reason for having progeny is given in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*. When the student ends his Vedic studies, he requests permission to leave from his teacher (see *Samavartan*). The teacher then blesses him with some poignant advice which he should imbibe for life. One of the commands is:

*Prajatantun ma vyavachchhetseehi...*

(Shikshavalli, Anuvak 11.11)

i.e. Do not terminate one’s lineage – let it continue (by having children).

## (2) *Pumsavan* (Engendering a male issue)

*Pumsavan* and *Simantonnayan* (the third *samskara*) are only performed during the woman's first issue. *Pumsavana* is performed in the third or fourth month of pregnancy when the moon is in a male constellation, particularly the *Tishya-nakshatra*. This symbolises a male child. Therefore the term *pumsavana* literally means 'male procreation'. Sushrut, the ancient rishi of Ayurveda, has described the procedure in his *Sushrut Sambita*: "Having pounded milk with any of these herbs – *Sulakshmana*, *Batasurga*, *Sabadevi* and *Vishwadeva* – one should instil three or four drops of juice in the right nostril of the pregnant woman. She should not spit out the juice."

## (3) *Simantonnayan* (Hair-parting)

In Gujarati this is known as *Kholo bharavo*. In this, the husband parts the wife's hair. The religious significance of this *samskara* is to bring prosperity to the mother and long life to the unborn child. It also wards off evil influence. The physiological significance is astonishingly poignant and advanced. Sushrut (*Sharirsthan*, Ch.33) believed that the foetus's mind formed in the fifth month of pregnancy. Hence the mother is required to take the utmost care for delivering a healthy child. Stipulating the details, Sushrut enjoined the pregnant mother to avoid exertion of all kinds: refrain from sleeping during the day and keeping awake at night, and also avoid fear, purgatives, phlebotomy (blood letting by slicing veins) and postponing natural excretions (*Sharirsthan* Ch.21).

Besides *samskars* which affect the physical health of the foetus, ancient *shastras* contain examples of learning *samskars* imprinted on it. From the *Mahabharat*, we know that Arjun's son, Abhimanyu, learnt the secrets of battle strategy while in his mother, Subhadra's womb. The child-devotee Prahlad of the *Bhagvatam*, learnt about the glory of Narayan while in his

mother, Kayadhu's, womb. Just as a foetus can attain good spiritual samskars from the external world, the opposite is also true. It can definitely be affected by certain undesirable practices of the mother. Today we know that smoking, alcohol, certain medications and drugs have a detrimental effect on the foetus. The *Varaha Smruti* prohibits eating meat during pregnancy. Therefore, the Smrutis enjoined the husband to take every possible care to preserve the physical, mental and spiritual health of his pregnant wife. The *Kalavidhan* prohibits him from going abroad or to war, from building a new house and bathing in the sea.

## Childhood Samskars

### (4) *Jatakarma* (Birth rituals)

These rituals are performed at the birth of the child. It is believed that the moon has a special effect on the newly born. In addition, the constellation of the planets – *nakshatras* – also determine the degree of auspiciousness. If birth occurs during an inauspicious arrangement, the jatakarmas are performed to ward off their detrimental effects on the child. The father would also request the *Brahmanishtha Satpurush* for blessings.

In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya a *Sutak* (ref. Antyeshti) period of 30 days by the mother, 12 days by other family members and 3 days by relatives, is observed during which personal worship rituals such as puja, arti and thal are suspended. A ritual known as *vartaman vidhi* is also performed on the newborn. The male child is given *vartaman* and *kanthi* by sadhus or a senior male devotee in the nearest mandir or Satsang centre (see p.52). Similarly the female child is initiated by a senior female devotee.

### (5) *Namkaran* (Name-giving)

A name is chosen from the one or more syllables ascribed to

each *rashi*(zodiac). An the rashi is decided from the position of the moon at the time of birth.

In the Hindu Dharma, a child is frequently named after an avatar, deity, sage, scriptural character, sacred place or river, as a constant reminder of the lofty import of the name.

The *Paraskar Gruhyasutra* advocates naming a child ten nights after birth.

*Dasbaratre vyushie namkaranamiti.*

Formerly a name was based on the month of birth. This was the *masnam*, usually derived from the name of an incarnation. A child was also named from the syllable represented by the nakshatra at birth. However nowadays, instead, a name is chosen from the syllables allocated to the *rashi* (zodiac) in which the moon happens to be in at the time of birth. For this the *Panchang* is consulted. This is known as the *nakshatranam*. These names always have meaningful sentiments.

Further, some give a loving nickname, known as *vyavaharnam*, which generally lacks meaning.

In the BAPS sanstha, the devotees approach Pramukh Swami Maharaj or other senior sadhus to name their children. (See table opposite for details of naming in the BAPS sanstha.)

Naming the New-born - Rashis

### Sanskrit English Syllables Example

Mesh Aries A, L, E Aruna, Lalita, Ela

Vrushabh Taurus B, V, U Bala, Vasudev, Urmila

Mithun Gemini K, Chh, Gh, Ksh Kirtan, Chhatrapal, Ghanshyam, Kshitij

Kark Cancer D (Í), H. Dahyalal, Harikrishna

Sinha Leo M, T (Ë), Manjula, Tarak

Kanya Virgo P Priyavadan

Tula Libra R, T (Ö), Rushi, Tilak

Vrushchik Scorpio N, Y Neelkanth, Yagnesh

Dhan Sagittarius Bh, Dh (Ô), F Bhagavat, Dharmang,  
Falguni  
Makar Capricorn Kh, J Khuman, Jyoti  
Kumbh Aquarius G, Sh (â), S Gita, Shantilal, Sushila  
Meen Pisces D(Ø), Ch, Z Darshan, Chandrika,  
Zamkuba

*The table above depicts the syllables each rashi represents with one example name for each.*

Namkaran is an important samskara, since an auspicious meaning (*bhavna*) is attached to a name based on an avatar or scriptural personality. Hence this bhavna imbues samskara to the individual. For example, a person named Harikrishna will endeavour to imbibe the divine sentiments associated with that avatar. A female named Sita will strive to imbibe virtues of the *Pativrata* - ideal wife, embodied by Shri Ram's consort Sita.

#### **(6) Nishkramana (First outing)**

In the third month the child is allowed darshan of *agni* (fire) and *chandra* (moon).

In the fourth month he is taken out of the house for the first time, by the father or maternal uncle, to the mandir for Parmeshwar's darshan.

#### **(7) Annaprashan (First feeding)**

Feeding the child with solid food is the next important samskara. For a son this is done in even months – the 6th, 8th, 10th or 12th months. For a daughter this is done in odd months – 5th, 7th or 9th months. The food offered is cooked rice with ghee. Some sutras advocate honey to be mixed with this.

By advocating this samskara, the wise sages accomplished two important considerations. First, the child is weaned away from the mother at a proper time. Second, it warns the mother to stop suckling the child. For, an uninformed mother may, out

of love, continue suckling the child, without realising that she was not doing much good to herself or the child.

### (8) *Chudakarma* (Chaul) (Shaving of head)

This *samskara* involves shaving the head for the first time (of a son) in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 5th year, and when initiating him with the *janoi* (Upanayan). According to Sushrut, the significance of this, together with nail cutting, is to give delight, lightness, prosperity, courage and happiness (*Chikitsasthan*, 24-72). Charak also voiced a similar opinion.

In the old days, the bridegroom also shaved his head prior to the marriage ceremony. In the *Uttar Ramacharit* of Bhavabhuti, all four sons of king Dasharath (father of Shri Rama) had their heads shaved before marriage.

Devotees in the BAPS Sanstha take the son to Pramukh Swami Maharaj, or senior sadhus, who clip a tuft of hair. The remaining hair is shaved off shortly afterwards.

A tuft of hair (*shikha*, *chotli*) is left in place at the top of the head for longevity. Sushrut points out its significance, "Inside the head, near the top, is the joint of a *sbira* (artery) and a *sandhi* (critical juncture). There, in the eddy of hairs, is a vital spot called the *adhipati* (overlord). Any injury to this part causes sudden death" (*Sharirasthan* VI, 83). In the course of time, the *shikha* was regarded as a symbol of the Hindu Dharma and its removal came to be regarded as a grave sin (*Laghu Harit* IV).

### (9) *Karnavedh* (Piercing the earlobes)

The child's ear lobes are pierced either on the 12th or 16th day; or 6th, 7th or 8th month; or 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th or 9th year. Sushrut reasoned, "The ears of a child should be pierced for protection (from diseases such as hydrocoele and hernia) and decoration (*Sharirasthan* 16.1, *Chikitsasthan* 19.21). One sutra enjoins that a goldsmith should pierce the ears while Sushrut

advocates a surgeon. For a boy, the right earlobe is pierced first and for a girl, the left. For boys today, this samskara is only prevalent in some states of India. In girls, this samskara, has lost its ritual significance and is only performed to enable them to wear earrings.

## Educational Samskars

### (10) *Vidyarambb* (Learning the alphabet)

This samskara is also known as *Akshararambha*, *Aksharlekhan*, *Akshara-vikaran* and *Aksharavishkaran*.

It is performed at the age of five and is necessary before commencing Vedic study – *Vedarambb*.

After bathing, the child sits facing west, while the *acharya* (teacher) sits facing east. Saffron and rice are scattered on a silver plank. With a gold or silver pen the child is made to write letters on the rice. The following phrases are written: “Salutation to Ganesh, salutation to Sarasvati (goddess of knowledge), salutation to family deities and salutation to Narayan and Lakshmi.” The child then writes, *Aum Namah Siddham*. He then presents gifts to the *acharya*, such as a *pagb* and *safo* (head adornment of cloth). The *acharya* then blesses the child.

### (11) Upanayan (Yagnopavit) (Sacred thread initiation)

At the age of seven the son is initiated by the *acharya* with the sacred thread, known as *janoi* or *yagnopavit*. Amongst all the foregoing samskars this is regarded as supreme. It is the dawn of a new life, hence *dvija* – twice born. The child enters studentship and a life of perfect discipline which involves *brahmacharya*. He leaves the guardianship of his parents to be looked after by the *acharya*. This samskara is performed by Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, for both boys and girls. Therefore, both the boy and girl received training in discipline, truthful living and physical service. During the course of time this samskara ceased to be given to girls, who thus failed to be formally educated.

Today, the tradition of education underlying this samskara has died out. Upanayan only functions to bestow *dvijatva* to the son.

*Upa* means 'near.' *Nayan* means 'to take (him) to,' i.e. to take the son to the teacher.

Like the parents, the acharya will mould the student with love and patience into a man of character. He will inculcate in him the invaluable knowledge of the Vedas. This is the second meaning of Upanayan. Among all the cultural systems of the world, none have advocated such a lofty and stringent ideal for studentship than this Hindu samskara. If a student sincerely observes this samskara, he will turn into a successful scholar. Added to this, during this period, he receives from the acharya, a strong background for the householder's life he will later enter.

Today, it is obviously not feasible to stay at the acharya's house. But the next best equivalent is to enter a *chhatralaya* – boarding school. The discipline involved infuses in the student a fortitude generally not possible at home.

Whereas students wear one *janoi*, householders could wear two; one for himself and one for his wife.

The three strings of the *janoi* denote the three *gunas* – *sattva* (reality), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (darkness). They also remind the wearer that he has to pay off the three debts he owes to the seers, ancestors and gods. The three strings are tied by a knot known as the *brahmagranthi* which symbolises Brahma (creator), Vishnu (sustainer) and Shiva (leveller).

One important significance of wearing the *janoi* is that the wearer would be constantly aware of the different deities which the threads represented. Therefore, he would be vigilant prior to any action not in accordance with the Dharma Shastras.

#### (12) Vedarambh (Beginning Vedic study)

This samskara was not mentioned in the earliest lists of the Dharma Sutras, which instead listed the four Vedic vows – *Ved Vrats*. It seemed that though upanayan marked the beginning

of education, it did not coincide with Vedic study. Therefore a separate samskara was felt necessary to initiate Vedic study. In this samskara, each student, according to his lineage, masters his own branch of the Vedas.

(13) Keshant (Godan) (Shaving the beard)

This samskara is included as one of the four *Ved Vrats*. When the other three faded, *keshant* itself became a separate samskara. *Kesh* means hair and *ant* means end. *Go* (»ô) also means hair, and *Da* (Îæ) to cut. So *Godan* means cutting of hair. This samskara involves the first shaving of the beard by the student at the age of sixteen. Godan also meant gifting a cow to the acharya and gifts to the barber.

Since the student now enters manhood he is required to be more vigilant over his impulses of youth. To remind him of his vow of brahmacharya, he is required to take the vow anew; to live in strict continence and austere discipline for one year.

(14) Samavartan (End of Studentship)

This samskara is performed at the end of the brahmacharya phase – the end of studentship. ‘*Samavartan*’ meant ‘returning home from the house of the acharya.’ This involves a ritual sacrificial bath known as *Awabbruth Snan*. It is sacrificial because it marks the end of the long sacrifice of brahmacharya. It is a ritual bath as it symbolises the crossing of the ocean of learning by the student – hence *Vidyasnatak* – one who has crossed the ocean of learning. In Sanskrit literature, learning is compared to an ocean.

Before the bath, the student has to obtain permission from the acharya to end his studentship and give him *guru-dakshina* – tuition fees. Permission is necessary because it certifies the student as a person fit in learning, habit and character for a married life. Obviously the student is not in a position to pay fees. One Sutra describes the debt of the teacher as unpayable, “Even the earth containing the seven continents is not sufficient

for the *guru-dakshina*.” But the formality is a required courtesy and the acharya says, “My child, enough with money. I am satisfied with thy merits.” He would elaborate with the impressive statements, known as *Dikshant Pravachan*, noted in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (I.11).

Those students who wished to remain as lifelong students observing *brahmacharya* would remain with the *acharya*. Today, this means accepting a spiritual guru – an Ekantik Satpurush and becoming a sadhu. The student thus bypasses the next two *ashrams*, to enter *sannyas*.

## Marriage Samskara

### (15) *Vivaha* (Marriage)

This is the most important of all the Hindu Samskars. The Smrutis laud the *grubastha* (householder) ashram as the highest, for it is the central support of the other three *ashrams*. They also stipulate paying off the three debts:

*Brahmacharyena rishibhyo yajnena devebhyaha prajaya pitrubhyaha*

(Taittiriya Samhita VI.3/10/5)

i.e. to the rishis by Vedic study, to the devas by yagnas and to ancestors by offspring. Hence the primary purpose of Hindu marriage is procreation.

Thirdly, a man can only perform religious rights if accompanied by his wife. The devas do not accept oblations performed by a bachelor:

*Ayajneeyo vaisha yo-patneekaha*

(Shatapatha Brahmana V.1.6.10)

Manu enjoins, “Having spent the first quarter of one’s life in the guru’s house, the second quarter in one’s own house with the wife, and the third quarter in the forest, one should take *sannyas* in the fourth, casting away every worldly tie” (4-1). By marriage an individual is able to achieve the four *purusharthas*

(endeavours) of life: *Dharma* (righteousness), *Artha* (wealth), *Kam* (desire) and *Moksha* (salvation).

In addition to being a sacrament, Hindu marriage is also regarded as an important social institution. For developing a stable and ideal society, marriage has been regarded as an essential samskara in all cultures of the world. A society without loyal marital ties tends to degrade. It is said that promiscuity was one reason for ancient Roman society's downfall. By marriage, both an individual and society, while remaining within the moral norms, can progress together. Simultaneously it does not cause harm to others nor infringe upon one's independence. This samskara boosts cultural values and Dharma. It upholds and promotes moral righteousness and self control.

#### Eight Types of Marriages

Advocated by Manu (3-21), these are divided into two groups: (i) the morally approved (*prashasta*) and (ii) the disapproved (*aprashasta*).

#### (I) *Prashasta*

1) ***Brahm***: This is the purest type. It was so called because it was thought fit for Brahmins. In this the girl is given by the father, with such ornaments that he can afford, to a man of character and learning, whom he has invited voluntarily and received respectfully, without taking anything in exchange (*Manu Smruti* 3-17). The Smrutis consider this type as the most honourable, as it is free from physical force, lust, imposition of conditions and lure of money. Social decency and religious considerations are fully taken into account.

2) ***Daiva***: This is the next type, inferior to the *Brahm*. In this, the girl is ornamented and ritually 'given away' by the father to a priest who officiated at the *yagna*. The priest then married her to the bridegroom. It was called *Daiva* since the gift was made on the occasion of a *Daiva yagna*. This method was prevalent among the first three Hindu classes.

3) *Arsh*: In this method the father of the bride received a pair or two of kine – a cow and an ox or two cows and two oxen, from the bridegroom for the purpose of a yagna and formed a part of a religious ritual. The pair of kine was not the bride's price. This method was known as Arsh because it was prevalent among the priestly families. Nonetheless, according to the *Manu Smruti* (3-53) accepting a gift, small or large, amounted to a sale.

4) *Prajapatya*: This involves the father giving away his daughter to a suitor with the specific understanding that they both perform their civic and religious duties together. The name Prajapatya suggests that the couple entered the bond for discharging their duties to Prajapati i.e. for procreating.

From the western point of view this type of marriage may be regarded satisfactory because the rights of the husband and wife are equally well secured. But from the view of the Hindu shastras, it is lower than the first three. This is because the daughter is given with mundane conditions. Hence the 'gift' cannot truly be regarded as free.

Now we consider the four types of marriage which are not commendable by the shastras.

## (II) *Aprashasta*

5) *Asura*: The *Manu Smruti* (3-31) defines this as, "Where the husband having paid money to the relations of the bride and the bride herself, accepts her out of free will; this is called the Asura type." The main consideration in this kind of marriage is money and it is, in reality, a purchase. Manu condemns it, "The learned father of the girl should not accept even the least amount of price. Accepting the price out of greed, he becomes the seller of children" (3-51). The *Aitareya Brahmana* (I.16) brands this type as *pashuvivaha* – animal marriage. Today this form of marriage is still prevalent in certain sections of Hindu society, where a dowry is demanded by the bridegroom's father from the bride's father. Public opinion has begun to frown upon

dowry. Religious and social leaders have been rallying against it. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has always condemned it. During the International Youth Festival in Vallabh Vidyanagar in 1990, he inspired 21,000 young men and women to take a vow of refusing dowry. To those who cannot afford the marriage costs, he arranges mass dowry-free marriages during grand festivals and yagnas.

6) *Gandharva*: According to Manu, “Where the bride and bridegroom meet each other of their own accord and the union is consummated in passion, that form is called Gandharva” (3-32). The name Gandharva is derived from a tribe of that name living in the Himalayas, in which it was a common occurrence. It was more prevalent among the Kshatriyas as they represented the most independent group in society. The majority of the law givers discouraged it on religious and moral grounds. It was regarded as lower than the first five forms, because it was performed without sacred rituals and it originated from passion, a factor which seemed tenuous.

7) *Rakshas*: Manu says, “Capture of a girl by force while she is crying, having killed, scattered and injured her relatives, is called *Rakshas Vivaha*” (3-21). This usually occurred during war or political upheavals. The Kshatriyas usually practised this since they participated in war and obtained women as war booties. The word *rakshas* means demonic.

8) *Paishach*: This was the least approved. Manu defines this as, “Cohabiting with a girl in loneliness, when she is sleepy, mad or intoxicated” (3-34). Obviously, this was the most uncivilized and barbaric method. Paishach means ‘of witches’.

## Hindu Marriage Sentiments

Monogamy remains the Hindu Dharma’s ideal. The ancient shastras cite Shiva and Parvati, Ram and Sita, Nala and Damayanti, and Satyavan and Savitri as exemplary.

Earlier, the Hindu marriage system was also described as a religious and social institution. More important is that it is a union of two spirits rather than just two individuals. To consider this metaphysically, an individual is made up of three bodies: physical, composed of matter (*stbul*), subtle, composed of mind (*sukshma*) and causal, composed of the Jiva (*karan*). The Vedic marriage is a union between all the three: matter with matter, mind with mind and jiva with jiva. With its sacramental vows, the couple embark on a journey together to attain the four endeavours (*purusharthas*) of life, mentioned earlier. During this journey the couple satisfy their desires – to earn, to beget children, and to serve society. Added to this, they follow the path of Bhakti-devotion and therein discover the divinity within themselves, of Brahman and Parabrahman. This spiritual development of two independent individuals is effected by marriage, which neither could achieve alone.

#### Concept of Equality

Additionally the Hindu shastras assert that man and wife form one whole. The wife is half-self; *ardhangi*. This concept of half-man and half-woman known as *ardhanarishwar*, is often depicted by murtis of Shri Shankar and Parvati.

The Sanskrit word for the couple, *dampati*, etymologically means that the husband and wife are the joint owners of the household:

*Dampatyo sahabhikarat.*

The wife is called *patni* on account of equality of rights with her husband.

This Hindu Dharma's lofty ideal of equality signifies interdependence and mutual co-operation. The *Malatimadbav* (VI.18) declared, "The husband and wife are to each other the best of friends, the essence of all relationship, the fulfillment of all desires, the very life itself. So is the husband to the wife and the wife to the husband":

*Preyo mitram bandhuta va samagra sarvekamaha sevadhir jeevitam  
va*

*Streenam bharta dharmadarashcha pumsam iti anyonyam vatsayor  
jnatam astu.*

Sita accompanied Ram in exile to share his suffering. Gandhari blindfolded her eyes lest she should enjoy a pleasure denied to her blind husband, Dhritarashtra. The wife, declares a Vedic verse, is the true friend of man:

*Sakha ha jaya*

(Aitareya Brahmana VII. 3,13.)

However as a wife, she is to try her utmost to promote her husband's happiness (*Mbh\**.XII,144,20). And her own happiness is centred in her husband (*Ramayan* II. 27,6; II,40,3). Bhagwan Swaminarayan too echoes this in the *Sati Gita*.

As for the husband, his most sacred duty is to maintain and support his wife at all cost; otherwise he has no right to be called a husband (*Mbh.* XII. 272,37). He must observe his vow of fidelity; its violation is the greatest sin he can commit (*Manu* 10-101).

Equality prevailed too in scriptural learning and spiritual pursuit since ancient times. The *Rg Veda* contains *suktas* (hymns) composed by 27 women seers, known as *Brahmavadinis*. Some well known brahmavadinis of the Upanishads include: Gargi, Maitreyi, Katyayani and Shandily.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bhagwan Swaminarayan introduced a similar, yet unique order known as *Samkhyayoginis*. Women who were married, unmarried or widowed could study religious literature and impart instruction to other women in specially designated areas of mandir precincts, aloof from men. Accepting Parmatma as *Param Pati*, in accordance to the scriptural injunction:

*Twameva mata cha pita twameva, twameva bandhus cha sakha  
twameva...* they offered Him exuberant devotion, observed

harsh austerities and the highest asceticism to earn His grace.

### ***Concept of Atma in Marital Discord***

*Regarding each other as the Atma is the fundamental basis of a Vedic marriage. Only when the concept of the Atma is fully grasped can Hindu Dharma's true meaning of equality be appreciated. Failing this, body-consciousness, known as dehabhava, overrides all venerable aspects of marital union; culminating in the destruction of: patibhava (as husband), devabhava (as deity), pitabhava (as father) and sakhabhava (as friend). It is unique in all the world's cultures – which primarily observe the Gandharva system based on passion. The Gandharva system, being generally associated with dehabhava and rarely with the spirit, is more prone to marital discord, relative to the four Prashasta.*

*At the root of any marital discord lies intolerance due to body-consciousness and one's ego – the 'I' and 'mine'. If the couple is united by Atma for a common, ultimate goal, moksha, then 'I' and 'You' cease to exist. This is because 'I' and 'You' are empirically Atma. And when 'I' and 'You' are believed to be Atma, where is the conflict that would otherwise arise from selfish motives and desires? Therefore, in a Hindu marriage when conflicts and differences arise, they are easily resolved. The couple consider each other as Atma, for the Atma is immutable, genderless, eternal, and inherently divine (Gita 2/24, 25). Vivaha itself means 'to lift, to support, to uphold, to sustain'. Admittedly, both spouses have to make sacrifices and efforts to imbibe this lofty philosophy. It is not an overnight process, more a lifelong, sacred commitment. It is this philosophy which has made the Vedic marriage a grand success for thousands of years. Only the recent encroachment of the western belief systems, primarily based on superficial and mundane factors, have begun to ruin today's Hindu marriages.*

The aforementioned sentiments and a few others are symbolically depicted and verbally consolidated by mantras during the actual marriage ceremony whose steps we consider next.

### **The Marriage Ceremony**

Hindu shastras emphatically stress the importance of brahmacharya prior to marriage, in respect of sacred parenthood and for the character of the offspring:

Ram asks Lakshman:

*Pushpam drushtwa salam drushtwa, drushtwa strinam cha yauwanam,*

*Trini rupani drushtwaiwa kasya no chalate manaba.*

i.e. whose mind is not deflected on seeing a flower, a fruit and a beautiful woman?

Lakshman answers:

*Pita yasya shoochirbhuto mata yasya pativrata,  
Oobhabhyamewa sambhutastasya no chalate manaba.*

i.e. an individual who is brought up by a father who is pure, and a mother who is a *Pativrata* - chaste, his mind will not be deflected (on seeing the above three objects).

Similarly the *Sati Gita* declares, “Only when a man’s *punyas* (sacred merits) of a 100 births manifest, is he fortunate enough to be wedded to a wife who is staunch in Dharma and a *Pativrata*.”

Therefore which such chastity, the bride and the bridegroom enter the marriage *mandap* with lives that are pure. Each offers this as a supreme tribute to the other. “No other gift can quite compensate for the loss of this,” asserts S. Radhakrishnan in *Religion and Society*. Pramukh Swami Maharaj similarly lauds such purity and often exhorts young people to imbibe it sincerely as a sacred sacrament.

(1) **Haridralepan:** On the day before marriage, a cream of turmeric and oil is smeared over the bride’s body. This is known as *pithi cholvi* in Gujarati and *haridralepan* in Sanskrit. The symbolic sentiment is that if the bride is of a dark complexion this cosmetic treatment will endow her a lighter hue.

Before the marriage ceremony, Ganesh *pujan* is offered at the bride’s home as an auspicious beginning of the rituals since

Ganesh is the deity of auspiciousness.

Prior to Bhagwan Swaminarayan's advent in Gujarat, a vulgar tradition prevailed during marriage, of singing ribald songs known as *fatana*. Banning this practice, He instructed His poet Paramhansas, Muktanand and Premanand Swami, to compose auspicious kirtans glorifying the divine marriage episodes such as *Tulsi Vivaha* and *Rukhmani Vivaha*. These were to be sung instead of the *fatanas*. It took a formidable and divine personality like Bhagwan Swaminarayan to uproot the deep-seated custom. This wrought a remarkable edification of contemporary Gujarati society, by imbuing dignity and aestheticity to the marriage samskara.

(2) *Var Preksban* (Welcoming the bridegroom):

The bridegroom is welcomed at the entrance of the bride's house or marriage hall. The bride and the bridegroom place garlands over each other under the marriage canopy (*mandap*).

A vow is then recited, "In following my duty, in our financial matters, in fulfilling my physical thirst, I will always consult you, take your consent and act upon it." This is known as the *Pratijna Svikaar*.

(3) *Madhu-Parka* (Offering honey): The bride welcomes the bridegroom and gives him honey, yoghurt and ghee, suggesting that she will always please him with the sweetness of her behaviour. There is also a sour tinge to the mixture, which symbolises the bitterness that life can sometimes bring.

(4) *Pani Graban* (Proffering of bride's hand): The parents of the bride proffer her hand to the bridegroom and request him to accept their daughter as his wife. The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife and presents her with clothing and jewellery.

(5) *Vaivabik Homa* (Invoking the sacred fire): The sacred fire is invoked and offerings are poured onto it. Agni (fire) represents the mouth of Shri Vishnu and symbolises illumination of the mind, knowledge and happiness and Shri Vishnu serves as a

divine witness.

(6) *Shilarohan* (Stepping on the stone): The bride places her right foot on a stone. The bridegroom tells her to be as firm as the stone in his house so that they are able to face problems with ease.

(7) *Laja Homa* (Putting parched rice in the sacred fire): Four offerings are made to the sacred fire. The brother of the bride places parched rice into the bride's hands, half of which is meant to fall into the bridegroom's hands. Mantras are chanted. The bride prays to Yama, the God of Death, that he grants long life, health, happiness and prosperity to the bridegroom.

(8) *Saptapadi* (Taking seven steps): The bride and the bridegroom take seven steps around the sacred fire. At each step they invoke the blessings of God. As the couple walk the seven steps they pledge the following seven vows:

1. Let us take this first step towards food and the necessities of life
2. Let us take this second step towards strength and vigour
3. Let us take this third step towards wealth and prosperity
4. Let us take this fourth step towards obtaining happiness around the household
5. Let us take this fifth step for progeny
6. Let us take this sixth step to act according to the six seasons and time
7. Let us take this seventh step to believe in the same religion and lifelong friendship.

(9) *Agni Parikrama* (Circumambulating the sacred fire): The bride and the bridegroom move around the sacred fire four times. On the first three rounds the bride leads the bridegroom and on the fourth the bridegroom leads the bride. Before each round an offering is made. This ceremony is known as the *mangal phera* in Gujarati.

(10) *Saubhagya Chinha* (Blessing the bride): The bridegroom

blesses the bride by putting kumkum (vermillion powder) or *sindur* at the parting of her hair or on her forehead and by giving her a *mangalsutra* (sacred necklace).

(11) *Surya Darshan* (Looking at the sun): The bridegroom accepts the bride as his wife in the presence of the sun and tells her to look at it or at the Dhruva star (star of steadfastness) and at Arundhati (star of devotion). If the marriage is performed at night, the bridegroom tells her to be firm in her love and duty, and to be devoted to him like Arundhati was to the sage Vashishtha. The bride tells the bridegroom that she will follow their example and remain devoted.

(12) *Hrudaya Sparsb* (Touching of hearts): The bridegroom and bride touch each other's hearts. The bride tells the bridegroom, "I touch thy heart unto mine. God has given thee as my husband. May thy heart be mine now. When I talk to thee, please listen to me with perfect attention." The bridegroom repeats the vow to the bride.

(13) *Annaprasban* (Feeding the bridegroom): The bride feeds the bridegroom and tells him, "By feeding you this sweet food (traditionally *kansar* – made of wheat flour, sugar and ghee) I shall bind thy heart with the thread of truth and sincerity and love. My heart will be thine and thy heart will be mine forever."

(14) *Purnabuti* (Completion of ceremony): After the final offering is made to the sacred fire, the priest blesses the bride and bridegroom. Flower petals and rice are distributed to the guests, who shower the bride and the bridegroom. With their blessings the marriage ceremony is completed.

The bride and the bridegroom are no longer separate entities but an integrated personality who will share their lives in every way.

After marriage, a couple of the BAPS sampradaya is exhorted by Pramukh Swami Maharaj to perform a pilgrimage to the sect's five most sacred shrines in Gujarat, rather than going

on a honeymoon. There are several reasons for this: to pay homage to Shriji Maharaj, Gunatit Parampara and devas, pray for a harmonious marriage with financial stability, for children of character and samskars and to attain the goal of life, Ekantik Dharma, together. The five mandirs are: Gondal, Gadhada, Sarangpur, Bhadra and Bochasan. If time permits, other *shikharbaddh* mandirs, and *tirthas* such as: Chhapaiya, Ayodhya and Chansad should also be visited.

## DEATH SAMSKARAS

(16) Antyeshthi (Death rites)

The rishis and Dharma Sutras were at a consensus regarding the final goal of life, which they enjoined in the four ashrams – stages of life. The *Raghuvamsha* (1-8) stipulates:

*Sbaishave abhyastavidyanam yauvane vishayaishinam;*

*Vardhake munitvuttinam yogenante tanutyajam.*

i.e. One studies during childhood (*brahmacharya ashram*), fulfils his desires during youth (*grubastha ashram*), renounces worldly activity for silent contemplation during old age (*vanprastha*) and then endeavours for God-realisation, after which he leaves his body.

Antyeshthi then is the final samskara in a Hindu's life. Yajur Veda regards Vivaha as the sixteenth samskara while Rg Veda considers Antyeshthi. Though performed after the death of a person by his relatives, it is of importance because the value of the next world is higher than that of the present. The final rituals are performed with meticulous care with the help of brahmin priests.

The first ritual after death is to place a few tulsi leaves and a few drops of water in the mouth of the deceased. It is then laid on the floor, which has been purified by applying the sacred cowdung. The old clothes are removed and the body is bathed with sanctified water. The body is then covered with one piece

of a new, unbleached, uncut cloth known as *kafan*. The body is then laid on a bier (*nanami*) made of bamboo canes tied with jute strings. The underlying message in removing the old clothes can be gleaned from a Sanskrit verse:

*Dhanani bhumau pashavashcha goshtbe,  
Nari gruha dware sakha smashane,  
Debashchitayam paraloka marge,  
Dharmanugo gachhati Jeeva ekaha.*

i.e. Wealth will remain buried, cattle will remain in the pen, [his] wife will accompany [him] to the doorway, friends will accompany him to the crematorium, the body will come till the pyre, but on the path to the next world, the Jiva goes alone [with his karmas].

In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya there is a special ritual. Where possible the sadhus are invited, who then do *puja* of the deceased with kumkum. They place a new kanthi and flower garlands around the neck. Together with the nearest relatives, they then do *arti*, followed by *pradakshina*. Everyone present chants the Swaminarayan mantra. The sadhus then leave.

This rite, performed by sadhus remains unique to the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Infusing spiritual strength, it thus considerably offsets the grief and hurt suffered by the relatives of the deceased.

### Agni Samskara

The family members then take the body to the cremation pyre, all the while chanting Parmatma's name. *Ram bolo bhai Ram* is the most commonly uttered phrase. In Bengal it is *Hari bol, Hari bol*. In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya the *Swaminarayan dhun* is chanted. After laying the body on the pyre, ghee is poured over it and the fire kindled by the nearest relative. Sesame seeds are also sprinkled onto the fire as a form of *puja*. The latter two steps are obviously not possible where an electric kiln is used for cremation.

The fire lighted in the *vivaha* ceremony was later, by tradition, taken to the house and kept kindled in an altar throughout life. This signified that married life was to be lived together through life's vicissitudes. When one of the spouse died, the *agni* was taken in a crucible or pot to the crematorium, where it was used to light the pyre. This symbolised the end of *vivaha* and the beginning of *agni* samskara.

All those who participate in this rite then have a purificatory bath. The rituals and observances which then follow vary in different groups and parts of Gujarat.

Generally in India, children who expire before the age of two are buried rather than cremated. Cradled in the arms rather than tied in a nanami, they are taken to the outskirts of the village or town for burial.

In calamities

As a point of historical interest, when a large number of people died in a short duration, as in an epidemic, the Antyeshti rites altered. This stemmed from lack of firewood needed in huge quantities. Jim Corbett, the renowned hunter of man-eating tigers and leopards, cites such an occurrence in his *Man-eaters of Kumaon*. In the early 20th century, an outbreak of cholera and 'war fever' in 1918, decimated inhabitants in the Himalayan foothills. During the epidemics, people placed a live coal in the mouth of the deceased. The coal symbolised the Agni deity and the act ritually completed the Antyeshti rite. The body was then cast from a mountain top into the valley below.

In the aftermath of the 26th January 2001 earthquake in Bhuj, BAPS Sanstha's sadhus performed an antyeshti yagna twelve days later, on 7th February 2001, for the deceased. The yagna's sanctified water was then sprinkled on the sites where bodies remained buried under immovable rubble. This served as an alternative rite spiritually equal to cremation.

By cremation, the body's five basic components - known

as *Panch Bhutas* - *prithvi* (earth), *jal* (water), *tej* (fire), *vayu* (wind) and *akash* (space) are returned to those of the universe, thus maintaining the cosmic equilibrium. All the samskars are spiritually oriented. However some directly benefit the environment in one way or another.

Scientists in the past decade have begun to realise this. They've noted that, cremation for example, is the best, most effective and eco-friendly method of disposing the dead. Burial leads to enormous problems of space and groundwater contamination. Corpses infected with plague, slow-virus disease and infective cancers infect vectors which directly feed on them. This ultimately affects humans. Recently in England and Europe the prudence of incinerating even diseased farm animals has been realised, especially those afflicted with mad cow disease (BSF) and foot-and-mouth disease.

#### Asthi Sanchayan

After cremation, the ashes and residual bones (*asthi*) are collected in an urn. In some communities it is customary to wash them with milk and sanctified water. The urn is then taken to a sacred river such as Ganga, Narmada or the sacred confluence, *Triveni Sangam*, of three rivers: Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati in Allahabad. The Swaminarayan devotees also sprinkle the ashes in the sacred river Ghela, in Gadhada and Gondali, in Gondal. During the ritual, a Brahmin pandit utters Vedic mantras and performs the final rites for the salvation of the deceased. The ashes are then dispersed in the river.

#### Sutak (*Ashauch* – impurity)

This is a period of ten to thirteen days during which the nearest family members do not perform their personal daily, religious rituals such as *puja*, *arti* and *thal*. Their personal puja is given to a friend to perform on their behalf. The family members can visit the mandir for darshan. During this period, religious shastras and devotional songs are recited and sung respectively,

for the attainment of Akshardham by the deceased.

On either the eleventh, twelfth or thirteenth day, the relatives offer *thal* (food) to God in the local mandir to repay *pitru* (ancestral) debt.

The general Hindu belief is that as soon as the Jiva leaves the body, it adopts another body whose limbs grow day by day. On the tenth day after death this 'interim' body grows completely. The son of the deceased offers the *Pindas* - food balls made from wheat flour and water - to the growing limbs, either day to day or all ten together on the tenth day. It is believed that the deceased still continues his relation with this world. Therefore the deceased is termed *Pret*, which means departed, but who has not yet reached the other world.

On the eleventh day, Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and Yama are invoked, with Vishnu as the special witness. In their presence the deceased is offered *Pindas*. On the twelfth day the departed soul is given away to the other world, where he then resides with his forefathers. As soon as he reaches the other world he is released from his *Pret* body.

The relatives are then freed from the *Asauchha* (impurity). Then can then perform their daily puja.

These rites are also samskars on the soul to lead it to God.

An associated rite after cremation usually practised in India, is for the close male relatives of the deceased to shave their heads. This ritual has almost died out among Hindus living abroad. Besides this, some communities have only simple meals for a fixed number of days during *Sutak*.

Sajja

In Gujarat the family members then perform the *Sajja* ritual. In this, they offer a Brahmin: a cow, a cot, utensils, grain, a set of clothes and footwear and anything else that the deceased used. The Brahmin performs a *vidhi* (ritual) and takes the objects, symbolically to send them to the deceased for his use in the

next world.

In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya the belief is that the Atma, who is then termed *Akshar mukta*, is received by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Gunatitanand Swami and Pramukh Swami Maharaj (the *Pragat Gunatit Satpurush*) and taken to Akshardham. Thus redeemed, the Akshar mukta does not need any material offerings in Akshardham.

However if it is a family or caste tradition to perform the *Sajja*, this is done at the nearest mandir and the objects are offered to God Himself.

Another alternative which is becoming popular is the *Jivitkriya*. It is the same as the *Sajja*, except it is performed by a person while he is alive – as the name implies. During this ritual the central sentiment uttered is, “I am performing this ritual to please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj.” The Jivitkriya imbues a feeling of contentment in the individual since he/she witnesses it.

A remarkable, yet slight variation of the Jivitkriya, was a phenomenon often practised by many exalted devotees during Bhagwan Swaminarayan’s period. One such instance concerned a healthy, aged female devotee named Mulima of Ganla, who had attained God-realisation. One morning, she instructed her husband to return from the fields at midday, since Bhagwan Swaminarayan would be arriving in divine form to take her to *Akshardham*. Though astonished by such a request, since she was healthy, he nevertheless returned at noon. He saw her sitting cross-legged on the floor, which was smeared with cow dung. She instructed him to perform the final puja and arti! Closing her eyes and uttering her final *Jai Swaminarayan* to him, she forsook her body!

Antyeshti Samskars of Ascetics

*There are no antyeshti samskars prescribed by the Dharma Shastras for ascetics except leaving the body in a forest, cave or submerging in a*

*sacred river.*

*However Vaishnav sadhus are cremated. Since the Swaminarayan Sampradaya is also considered a Vaishnav Sampradaya, a deceased sadhu of this Sampradaya is cremated by fellow sadhus. If the sadhu's former relatives are within reach, they are summoned for final darshan. After cremation, there is no ritual of collecting and dispersing the ashes. Nor is sutak necessary either by the sadhus or the former relatives.*

*A stalwart sadhu is bathed with Panchamrut, adorned fresh saffron robes, kanthi, janoi, and garlands. Pujan is offered by imprinting chandan and kumkum on the forehead, followed by arti. The sadhus then carry his nanami to do five or more pradakshinas of the mandir, simultaneously singing the "Swaminarayan Dhun." Devotees too consider it meritorious in lifting the nanami.*

*In the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, the places of birth and agni samskara of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Gunatit successors are regarded as sacred, to the extent of being revered as tirths. As such, a shrine is consecrated on each site, where the asthi too, are kept for veneration and worship by devotees.*

## **Conclusion**

In the past the sixteen Hindu samskars formed an integral part of Hindu life. Today, with the encroachment of modern living, especially among urban Hindus and NRI's, only a few of them have survived; namkaran chaul, upanayan, vivaha and antyeshti. Yet these samskars, with their spiritual import, holistically 'samskarise' all aspects of an individual's life. The samskara rituals bring together family members, close relatives and friends, increasing the cohesion of the family unit. In turn this unit harmonizes and strengthens the social structure. The consequence of this is a healthy society with a strong cultural identity, which successfully boosts and perpetuates its traditional beliefs, customs, morals and values. This has been one of the key reasons for the Hindu Dharma withstanding the rigours and

onslaughts of foreign incursions and upheavals through the ages.

The ancient rishis and sages enjoined the sixteen samskars for the eternal benefit of mankind through their direct experience with the Divine. They wove them as 'outward acts' into the fabric of daily life of the Hindu, from pre-birth to post-death 'for inward or spiritual grace'. Today, the key samskara which will determine the cohesion and perpetuation of Hindu traditions worldwide is *Vivaha*, if observed sincerely with its pristine and lofty sentiments focused on Atma and Parmatma.

### Sixteen Samskars

*"Today we have forgotten the Sixteen Samskars. Those who are bhaktas, of religious inclination, who have faith in God and the shastras understand these samskars. One who is samskarised is known as Arya. When samskars of Dharma are imbibed by man, only then does he truly become man. If he lives an existence similar to an animal, he is not called man.*

*In Bharat (India) our samskars originated from the Vedas; given to us by rishis, avatars and sadhus. Yet today, we are losing them, swayed by western influence and etiquette. We have become modern but not civilized. People worry about looking good, yet do not care to bathe daily nor use water for the morning ablutions... Alcohol, addictions, meat, partying... these are not our samskars. We may have learnt to have meals on the {dinner} table, yet we have forgotten our adhyatmic samskars. We should not forget our eternal, original values. We should imbibe and perpetuate them.*

*Bhagwan Swaminarayan was invested with the childhood samskars. Though He is the Supreme Reality, He set an example for us. God and the sadhus imbue us samskars for eternal happiness."*

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj  
10th February 2001, Amdavad.

## 17. Parayan

There is a lofty tradition in Sanatan Dharma of holding a *katha parayan* after a person's demise. Instead of mourning for the person, relatives arrange a reading of holy shastras which glorify Bhagwan's *lila charitras*. This helps alleviate the pain from the loss of the departed. It also positively infuses spiritual fortitude in the relatives.

People may also arrange a Parayan for any one of the following : to earn Parmatma's grace, for the overall well being of one's family and relatives, for the success of a forthcoming occasion or project.

A parayan is an extended katha. It may be held for one day, upto ten days. The parayan which is held after antyeshti of an individual is usually of ten days. It remains flexible in different groups and sections of people. Some usually just hold reading of one of the following : the *Gita*, *Ramayan*, the *Garud Puran* or *Hanuman Chalisa*. Others chant *Ram dhun* for a certain number of hours per day, for a week or so. This is a Parayan in the form of dhun.

### Origin

The concept of parayan or an extended katha originates in the Shrimad Bhagvat. The noble hearted Gokarna wished to perform some religious ritual for spiritually uplifting his dead step-brother, Dhundhukari's *jivatma*. The latter had been steeped in all forms of *pap karmas* during his life. Therefore he became a ghost. People advised Gokarna to perform all sorts of *vrats* and endeavours for redeeming Dhundhukari. Suryadeva advised him to hold the Bhagvat katha for seven days.

Dhundhukari listened to the Bhagvat katha by residing in a bamboo cane with seven knots.

After each day's katha, one knot of the bamboo cane would

crack apart. Gokarna realised that this was the beginning of Dhundhukari's liberation. At the end of the katha on the seventh day, the seventh knot cracked. Dhundhukari then attained *moksh* and transcended to Swarg.

Since then, parayan of the Bhagvat has greater significance for people who wish to uplift the *jivatma* of their departed relatives.

Close relatives may also observe a diet of *farar* during the parayan's duration, as a form of self-abnegation and to save time from cooking which can be spent in *Hari smaran*. Light foods also help increase concentration and decrease bouts of dozing, which is a common occurrence in lengthy kathas!

### Parayan in the Swaminarayan Sampraday

It has been a tradition to hold a parayan of either the *Bhaktachintamani* or *Harililamrut*, by relatives of the departed. These texts are usually sung by sadhus in the nearest mandir or satsang centre.

In the Shikshapatri, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has enjoined followers to listen to katha as a special and extra vow, during the holy month of Shravan :

*Ekasmin shrāvane māsi sa twashaktaistu mānavaihi,  
Vishnobo kathāyābhā shravanam vāchanam gunakirtanam...*

Shikshapatri 76-76

Traditionally from the time of Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, this katha was of the Harililamrut. This poetic text, glorifies Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *lila charitras*. It was originally composed in two volumes in the Devnagri script by Kavishwar Dalpatram, the renowned poet of mid-19th century Gujarat, under the auspices of Acharya Shri Viharilalji Maharaj of Vartal. In 1999 BAPS Sanstha rendered it in Gujarati script.

During Shravan, BAPS followers worldwide, visit their nearest mandir or satsang centre every evening, to listen to

sadhus or *grubasths* recite the Harililamrut's ineffably sweet and melodious verses. Each katha lasts for about 1.5 hours. Before the katha commences, the *yajmans* (sponsors) perform puja of the text, as well as of *katha-kar* (orator).

This is followed by arti. After the katha, the "Swaminarayan" *dhun* is sung. *Naivedya* (food) is then offered to Bhagwan. This *prasad* is then distributed to the listeners. Shravan being the holy month of observing fasts, many usually observe *ektana*. Hence the host of the parayan usually arranges *farari prasad*, of : fruit, *shiro* of *morio* or *rajagaro* or a dairy sweet such as penda.

During Shastriji Maharaj's time, he invariably advocated parayan of *Bhaktachintamani*, for devotees who wished to be relieved from domestic discord, illness or poverty. Yogiji Maharaj and HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj, too continued this tradition.

Parayan then is a unique katha ritual that harmonises externally and internally. For several hours everyday, it brings together devotees or relatives of a large family, creating harmony and uniting them. Listening and reminiscing *lila charitras* of Parmatma, His Satpurush and exalted devotees, also infuses spiritual fortitude - inner harmony. Simultaneously it lessens and even washes away the pain and grief of an individual's loss, by instilling an understanding of the miserable, perishable and ephemeral nature of the human body. Moreover katha provides knowledge of the immortal, *chaitanya* and *sat-chid-anand* nature of the atma. Hence individuals can cope with post-death stress through parayan, a ritual unique to Sanatan Dharma.

# 18. Bal Samskars

(Child Nurturing)

- Which aspects of Bal samskars should be given greater emphasis?

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj's advice on Bal samskars.

(1) Which aspects of Bal samskars should be given greater emphasis?

(i) Example better than advice.

We all know the answer to this but we turn a blind eye to it. Why? The reason is that, it is we who become the targets! In relation to *Bal samskars*, parents should put the greatest emphasis on their own thoughts and practice.

The thoughts and practice of the parents are literally passed on to the child through blood. Our ancient seers have advised that the parents' mode of existence should be pure even before the birth of the child.

In the *Ramayan*, Shri Ram asks Lakshman :

*Pushpam drushtwa falam drushtwa, drushtwa strinam cha yauwanam,*

*Trini rupani drushtwaiwa kasya no chalate manaba.*

i.e. Whose mind is not deflected on seeing a flower, a fruit and a beautiful woman?

Lakshman answers :

*Pita yasya shoochirbhuto mata yasya pativrata,*

*Oobhabhyamewa sambhutastasya no chalate manaba.*

i.e. An individual who is brought up by a father who is pure, and a mother who is chaste, his mind will not be deflected (on seeing the above three forms).

The thoughts and character of the mother are imprinted even in the foetus. This was the injunction of our ancient seers tens of thousands of years ago! Today, medical science is only just beginning to grasp this concept.

*Bal samskars* also depend on the environment the husband provides the wife during her pregnancy. We are all familiar with the stories of Prahlad and Shukdevji, who obtained their ideal *samskars* in the womb. After birth, a child first emulates his mother, then the father. Parents play the most fundamental role in imparting *samskars* to their children. Two well-known examples from Hindu culture are of king Gopichand and Sati Madalsa. The former, in the prime of youth, was inspired by his mother who informed him of the miserable and ephemeral nature of mundane pleasures. This induced him to forsake his kingdom to perform austerities in the forest, for God-realization.

Queen Sati Madalsa gave *samskars* to all her four princes about the ephemeral *samsara*. Therefore they renounced the rich kingdom to perform austerities in the forest, to attain God-realization.

A child is a supreme mimic. He will copy you by wearing spectacles or by folding one leg over the other to sit in an easy chair pretending to read a newspaper. He will cry to quieten his younger baby brother. He will caress his sibling's forehead, mimicking his mother! All because he has observed this in minute detail.

Which scene would you prefer? Him mimicking *arti* or toting a gun at you?

If you sing the *arti*, then he will clap his hands and will gurgle a few words. When you do *puja*, he will sit quietly next to you and observe with curiosity. If you take him to the *mandir* holding his fingers, then on the next occasion he will come of his own accord. If you do not offer *dandvat pranams* to the *murtis* in the *mandir*, but order him to do so, nothing on Earth will make him do them unless you do them first! If you observe moral values in life, then your child will definitely follow you.

Therefore it behoves upon the parents to live exemplary lives such that their imprints become the guiding ideals for the child.

## (ii) Importance of Vernacular.

Language plays another crucial role in giving Bal *Samskars*. Hindus living outside India would do well to talk to their children in their vernacular - Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali - as the case may be. From the day a child is born, parents should converse with him in the vernacular. In school he will inevitably learn and speak English. So parents need not worry about English. But at home, it will not be easy to impart our Hindu traditions in English. Speaking to our children in the vernacular will provide them a basic working vocabulary with which to impart our important *samskars*. These will include religious, cultural, ethical and moral values. For example :-

i) respect for all elders including relatives, teachers and sadhus.

ii) importance of :- *ahimsa*-vegetarianism, worshipping God and *seva* (service) for family, community and Satsang.

These *samskars* and the vernacular are inter-dependent; homogeneously mixed. It is said that a culture disintegrates when its language dies out. History has borne this out amongst many communities in the world. For example, the Japanese, Vietnamese, Hispanics and Indians who have settled either in the U.S.A or U.K., who failed to maintain their original language have discovered to their horror that they are developing a cultural, familial and generational gap with their offspring.

Whilst discussing failings of language, let us consider just one, amongst many basic drawbacks of English which directly influence family life. If a child asks his parent, "Where are you going"? it sounds very rude, because of the "you" pronoun. In Gujarati and Hindi, the pronouns *tamey* and *ap* are available; equivalent to 'vous' in French. Either would not only sound sweet but is far more respectful. These pronouns automatically ingrain in the child a deep respect for his parents and elder siblings. *Tu* (or *tum* - Hindi) equivalent to 'tu' in French is only

used for those equal or younger in age.

Therefore it is extremely important for parents to spare special time to teach children one's vernacular. It is an asset which will be amply rewarded later, especially peace of mind.

Gujarati devotees should bear in mind and inculcate in their children the glory of Gujarati. It is a sacred language since Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the Guru Parampara spoke it, and hence the Sampradaya's most sacred texts; *Vachanamrutam* and *Swamini Vato* were compiled in Gujarati too. To crown the reasoning, our Guru HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj also speaks Gujarati. Therefore the young should learn it, to understand his sermons and identify with the humourous parables he often vividly narrates.

## Bal Samskars

*“If you do not give your child the asset of God, then your financial assets will be ruined.*

*“Those children who do not have samskars just roam about. If parents keep good reading material at home, then a holy atmosphere of satsang will prevail. But if there are posters of film stars everywhere, then the child is bound to watch films !*

*“Some people are of the opinion that they will watch T.V. in moderation, but in reality, no such thing occurs. Once the T.V. arrives, it will destroy samskars. Immoral scenes and commercials will always be there. When you (the parents) go to work, the children will be at home.*

*“The child is more advanced than the father. Some people take pride in that, ‘My baby boy can switch on the T.V. himself! He is learning. We will raise him well.’ But only when he visits the mandir and obtains the Satsang samskars, will he become a good child.”*

- Pramukh Swami Maharaj

## 19. Grahana (Eclipse)

### Origin

The ancient shastras cite the continual conflict between the *devas* (deities) and *danavas* (demons) . The story of the eclipse is related to one such battle.

\* During the *Samudra Manthan*, the pot of *amrut*-nectar fell into the hands of the *devas*. However, the *danavas* craved for the *amrut* to render them immortality. To detract them, Vishnu assumed the form of an attractive damsel named Mohini, while he distributed the *amrut* to the *devas*. However, two demons, Rahu and Ketu, discretely sat between the sun and moon, to avail of the *amrut*. They even imbibed it but before they could swallow it the *devas* discovered their true identity. Instantly they beheaded the two. However the heads, containing *amrut* became immortal. Both then pledged revenge on the sun and moon. Till today, they bother the two, by *Grahana* – literally, ‘seizing’ them.

\* Another Pauranic story says that Simhika, one of Kashyap rishi’s wives requested him for progeny at a peculiar time. Infuriated, he gave her a son, Rahu, who was as dreadful as the deity of death. Soon after birth he fought with Aditi’s son and was defeated. Humiliated, he performed severe penances in the Himalayas for ten thousand years. This pleased Brahma, who offered a boon. Rahu requested that he be granted the status of a planet, immortality, victory over the *devas* and power to devour two luminaries. Brahma granted the boon but added, “You shall find it extremely difficult to digest these two.”

Rahu then rushed at the two luminaries, sun and moon. However Vishnu hurled his discus and beheaded him and said, “Let the Creator’s words not be wasted. In your respective periods you may devour the two luminaries and thereby indicate good and bad occurrences for the world.”

## Sentiments

Just as the sun and moon are eclipsed by evil in the form of Rahu and Ketu, jivas have been clouded by the darkness of *maya*. For liberation from this darkness, Bhagwan Swaminarayan advocates - *asharo* – refuge of God and *atmabuddhi* – associating with the God-realised sadhu and devotees (Vach.Jetalpur 1).

## Rituals

Great sanctity was (and is) attached to the time of *grahana* when the seers advocated bathing, *dan* and *shraaddh*. The *Shatatapa* (Ref.?) states that bathing, *tapas*, *dan* and *shraaddh* during eclipses yield inexhaustible *punya*. The *Mahabharat* (*Van Parva* 200-25) cites that, on *ayana* and *Vishuva* days and during solar and lunar eclipse, one should donate land with *dakshina* (money) to a pious brahmin.

The duration of eclipse is regarded as a period of impurity and evil. Therefore in the *Shikshapatri* Bhagwan Swaminarayan advocates :

*Raverindoshchoparāge jāyamāne – parābhā kriyābhā,  
bitwāshbu shuchibhibhi sarvaihi kāryābhā Krishnamanor japaba*

[Shik.86]

i.e. During the solar and lunar eclipses, devotees should suspend all their usual activities and chant God's name or mantra.

*Jatayamatha tanmuktau krutwā snānam sachelakam,  
deyam dānam grubijanaibhi shaktyā-nyaistwarchya Ishwaraha*

[Shik.87]

i.e. When the eclipse is over, they should bathe with their clothes on. The householders should give alms according to their means and the ascetics shall perform puja of God.

He also prohibits food intake during eclipse and emphatically advocates *bhajan*. This can be in the form of chanting the Swaminarayan *dhun*, *samkirtan* - singing kirtans, extolling,

reciting and listening to Parmatma's *lila* – divine episodes and glory. Touching other objects is also forbidden. Therefore while offering such bhakti, devotees sit either on the bare floor, jute cloth or a woollen blanket. Orthodox Hindus all over India observe this sincerely.

Sleeping during eclipse is also strictly forbidden. Only the severely ill are exempted from the codes of food and sleep.

In the *shikharbaddh* mandirs of the Swaminarayan Sampraday the sadhus purify the murtis with wet towels in a specified manner.

To protect dry foodstuffs, grain flour and other edibles such as medicine and water, the shastras advocate *darbh* grass stalks to be placed on the respective containers. This is said to nullify the detrimental effects of the rays.

The ritual of using the *darbh* grass stalk ( ) to nullify the harmful effects of rays emanating during an eclipse may not appear scientific today. However this does not negate its effectivity. Future research may verify this. Whatever the rishis proclaimed was true, though they may not always have divulged the reasons. Consider a similar example. They advocated burning cow's ghee and cow dung cakes as fuel in a yagna to purify the surroundings and ward off evil.

### **Dan ( Donation )**

Over the whole of ancient and medieval Bharat, kings and the affluent religiously donated land during eclipses. The Pattadakal pillar inscription of the western Chalukya king Kirtivarman II records a gift of fields on a total solar eclipse in Shravan, on 25th June 754 CE. The Navsari plate of the Gujarat Rashtrakut king Karka I .....(.....)

(Kane, P.V.*History of Dharmashastra, Vol.V.Part I.* Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 2nd ed., 1974, pp.242-6)

*Sbraqddb* ( Homage ritual for ancestors )

The *Yajnavalkya Smruti* (10-218) also enumerates eclipses among the proper times for *shraquddh*.

### ***Punya* (Merit)**

The Puranas and other texts made some distinctions regarding *punya* - merit between eclipses in certain months and baths in certain rivers or holy places.

Vyas proclaims that, "A lunar eclipse is one hundred thousand times (more meritorious than an ordinary day) and a solar eclipse ten times more than the lunar. And if the waters of the Ganga are near (for a bath) then a lunar is one crore times (more meritorious) and a solar ten times more than the lunar.

The *Kalanirnay* adocates river Godavari for a bath during a lunar eclipse and one in the Narmada for a solar. The *Devipurān* declares: "an eclipse in Kartik has the greatest *punya* at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna, in Margashirsh at Devika, in Posh Narmada and in Magh Sannihita is auspicious."

#### Solar Eclipse celebrated in Kurukshetra

Thousands of Hindus celebrate the solar eclipse in the pond at Thaneshvar, fed by the river Saraswati, in the great plains of Kurukshetra, 120 miles northwest of Delhi, by ritual bathing, donation and so forth. The shastras describe a unique relationship between an eclipse and Kurukshetra.

Just as the various organs of the body have their function, similarly, the earth - symbolic as a body - has various areas which are also of scientific importance. For example, as the head is to the body, the Gauri peak in the Himalayas is to earth. And in the same sequence, the foothills are considered as the feet. The adjacent left and right areas are considered the arms and so on.

The whole of geographical Bharat, also reflects such symbolism. It is a scientifically proven fact that the celestial bodies in the heavens do not affect the earth in all areas in the same manner. In some areas celestial bodies do exert stronger or

lesser effects. In the same way these bodies affect wind and water differently. This is reflected by the different whether conditions prevailing and therefore resulting in varied vegetation and life forms in these areas.

In the Vedas, Kurukshetra is known as *Kurukshetram Brahmasadan* - the dwelling of Brahman. Just as the jiva resides predominantly in the heart of the human body, similarly Kurukshetra is the heart of the earth. The *Atharva Veda* (12-1-22) says:

*Sa no bhumibi pranamasyurdadhātu*

i.e. that land (Kurukshetra) bestows *pran* and life on earth.

In this universe, the one and only source of *pran* is the Sun (*Atharva Veda* 21/27/7).

Therefore during a solar eclipse, Rahu prevents solar rays - hence *pran* - from reaching the life forms on earth. Therefore *pran* energy is minimised on earth. That is why, during this period the rishis enjoin people to minimise their daily activities, to maintain, stabilise and charge their limited intrinsic *pran shakti* by doing *bhajan*, religious rituals and activities. If this is not observed, the heart which is the pranic centre in the body, is affected detrimentally.

Similarly, the earth's heart being Kurukshetra, requires its own *pran* to be maintained and boosted. Therefore people perform similar religious rituals in Kurukshetra to boost earth's *pran*.

Hence performing such rituals in Kurukshetra is of greater importance and meritorious than performing them elsewhere on earth.

During the partial solar eclipse on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1955, about four lakh people bathed at Kurukshetra and Sanyahet (ancient Sannihita).

## Lunar Eclipse Celebrated in Kashi

Just as Kurukshetra is considered the earth's heart, similarly,

the rishis ascribe Kashi as the earth's mind. And the deity of the mind is *Chandra* (moon). Hence the moon continually charges the mind's - Kashi's - energy.

Therefore during a lunar eclipse, the lunar energy is severed by Ketu. Similar to the preservation of pran energy during a solar eclipse, the rishis advocate conserving and preserving mental energy during a lunar eclipse. And so they enjoin man to perform religious rituals and activities in Kashi – *Grahane tu Kashi* – to maintain mental vitality. Kashi's glory is extolled in the Vedas. Brahma, the Creator recited the Vedas in this sacred city.

To perform the rituals, an area of five *kosh* ( ) around Kashi is considered ideal. These include bathing in the Ganga and darshan of Kashivishwanath Mahadev (Shiv) (*Atharva Veda* 6-24-1).

Kashi's spirituality is so profound that even Gautam Buddha, who did not believe in the Vedas, chose Sarnath, an area in Kashi to found the administrative centre of his sect.

Though Kabir was not learned in the mundane sense, the penetrating and powerful sentiments latent in his poetic verses probably are the result of living in Kashi.

The actual astronomical events causing an eclipse was known to Indian astronomers several centuries before the seer Varahamihir (505 CE). He mentions this in his *Brubhat Sambita* (V-1 to 8). In the 8<sup>th</sup> aphorism he says, "In a lunar eclipse the moon enters the sun's disc" i.e. comes between the sun and the earth. He further asserts, "In this manner the ancient seers, endowed with divine insight explained the causes of eclipses(V-13)."

In the absence of the scientific instruments available today, it is amazing that ancient India's rishi astronomers such as Aryabhat, Varahamihir and others, were able to calculate and derive astronomical distances and figures. In his redacted

version of the *Surya Siddhanta*, Varahamihir gives the formula to calculate the diameter of shadow of a lunar eclipse:

$$\frac{\text{Diameter shadow of Earth's diameter} - (\text{Sun's diameter} - \text{Earth's diameter}) \times (\text{Moon's true distance})}{\text{Sun's true distance.}}$$

The mind-boggling formula for a solar eclipse's shadow covers two pages !

The sages and rishis of Bharat also gleaned the spiritual significance of even astronomical events such as eclipses. By their *tapas* and insight they enjoined special observances to circumvent the harmful effects of eclipses. These effects not only concerned the body, but the mind and atma too. Hence the rishis offered holistic precautionary measures.

## Effects

Eclipses have detrimental effects on living organisms in several ways. The rays reaching earth during eclipses hamper the digestive system and it is said that some domestic animals such as dogs naturally do not touch food during eclipses. The rays also have harmful effects on freshly cooked food. Therefore food intake is strictly forbidden during eclipse. The shastras claim that the rays during an eclipse also harm the foetus in a pregnant woman.

The *Brubhat Sambita* of Varahamihir (V-43) describes ten kinds of eclipses; *Sarya*, *Apasarya*, *Leha*, *Grasana*, *Nirodha*, *Avamardana*, *Aroha*, *Aghrata*, *Madhyatamas* and *Tamontya*. Each type exerts its own effects on terrestrial life. For instance, during the *Leha* (licking), the eclipsed is enveloped all round (or licked) by the tongues of darkness. All beings will be happy and there will be plenty of water on earth (V-45). In the *Avamardana* (crushing), when the eclipse is total and lasts long, there will

be destruction of prominent kings and leading countries (V-48). In the *Madhyatamas* (darkness in the centre), the shadow appears in the centre of the disc, leaving the surrounding parts bright. In this, people in the central regions will suffer harm, and humanity in general will be gripped with fear and stomach disorders (V-51).

Varahamihir further provides astonishing details of effects deduced from the different colours of the eclipsed disc (V-53 to 59). For example, if the colour is green, all sorts of diseases will afflict people and crops will be destroyed by floods, drought, etc. If the disc appears reddish, or golden, a famine may occur.

The sage then describes the effects when different planets such as Mars, Venus, etc., conjoin with either the solar or lunar eclipse, and which areas and peoples of Bharat will be affected. (V-60 to 68).

Charak, the ancient rishi of Ayurved forbids students to study during *mahagrāhōpagamane* – eclipses, among other natural phenomena such as conflagration, earthquake and twilight (*Charak Sambhita, Sutrasthan* 8-24). The *Manu Smṛiti* (4-105) too forbids study during eclipse. It also forbids looking at the sun during an eclipse, in a water reflection and at midday (4-37).

When viewing eclipses, modern scientists too take precautionary measures such as wearing special goggles which prevent harmful rays from damaging the retina. This clearly proves that eclipses do harm the physical body. However, with their tapas and meditative insight, the rishis also revealed the detrimental effects on the mental and spiritual states. To prevent these effects they prescribed rituals and observances such as the cessation of worldly activities and instead, chanting Parmatma's name. The latter is known as *Namjapa*, which has immense glory and punya..

*Gokotidānam grabhane kbagsya prayāggange daka kalpavasaha,  
yagnayutam merusuwarnadānam Govindkirtanam samam sbatanshe*

{ *Shri Haribhaktivilas* 11/186}

i.e. The punya accrued by chanting Parmatma's name is not equal to even one-hundredth of that occurred by donating one lakh cows during a solar eclipse, observing *Kalpavas* in Ganga of Prayag, performing 10,000 *yagnas* and donating gold equal to mount Meru !

Shri Krishna proclaims “ *yagnānām japayagno-smi* – of all *yagnas* I am *japa yagna* “ ( *Gita* 10/25).

An astronomical phenomenon such as eclipse being celebrated as an *utsav*, as well as being regarded as a ritual, may appear peculiar. The underlying significance for it being categorised as an *utsav* is that during the period of eclipse, one actively chants Parmatma's name or does *samkirtan* instead of just sitting idly. Whenever an activity involves Parmatma, it is termed *Adhyatmic* rather than a mere *vyavaharic vidhi* - social custom or ritual. Moreover such an observance, to maintain purity and ward off evil, is considered an *utsav* in the spiritual sense.

· *Manu Smruti* 2/43, 3/208.

# 20. Ahar Shuddhi

(Diet Purity)

- Upanishadic Ideals of Diet Purity
- Ahimsa
- Pap Karma (Sin)
- Tamsic Diet
- Rajasic Diet
- Sattvic Diet
- Four types of Doshas
- Diet Purity in the Kitchen
- Diet Purity in the Home Shrine
- Personal Diet Purity and,
- Diet Purity Relative to Time and Seasons.

## Upanishadic Ideals of Diet Purity

Modern science has ingrained us to think meticulously about our daily allowances of proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals and trace elements. It has taught us to be obsessed about free radicals, salt, sugar, cholesterol, preservatives and additives. And now researchers have introduced genetically modified (GM) crops. We rant and rave about their possible longterm horrors. However all these issues focus only on one factor – the physical body.

Yet since Vedic times the rishis meditated and computed the effects of diet on man's thoughts, his higher consciousness, and his spirit. They delved deep to fathom the mechanisms of his behavior with himself, with those around him, with his environment and the Divine. Gleaning the empirical truths, they prescribed holistic injunctions of diet purity to edify his body, mind and spirit.

The *Chbandogya Upanishad* (7-26-2) reveals :

*aharshudbhau sattvashuddhibi, sattvashuddhau druva smrutibi,*

*Smrutilambhe sarvagranthinam vipramokshaha.*

i.e. Purity of diet purifies the *antahkaran* (heart). A purified antahkaran stabilises the mind and meditation. And after mastering meditation, the *vasanas* - baser instincts, are instantly eradicated.

Bhagwan Swaminarayan too echoes this stipulation in the *Satsangijivanam* (4.99. 47)

The rishi of the Upanishad has ordained this eternal and benevolent truth for the whole of mankind. In this chapter we examine its subtle concepts and practical applications in our daily lives.

Primarily we have to bear in mind that we have been granted a human birth by God's grace. Only with a human body are we able to endeavour to transcend metempsychosis – the cycle of infinite births and deaths. The shastras echo this :

*Shareeramadyam khalu dharma sadhanam.*

i.e. The human body is the only means to observe Dharma. Therefore only man has *vivek* - the wisdom to discriminate between good and bad, and what his duty is in society. And so only with a human body can Dharma be observed.

Secondly, this human body is composed of the *Panch Bhutas* – five elements, namely: earth, water, fire, air and space. As such it is sustained by air, water and food. The body's life force, known as *Prana* is sustained by food. In other words prana is dependent on food. Therefore if diet is spoiled, prana is vitiated. To correlate with the *Chbandogya Upanishad's* verse, a defiled prana will pollute the mind and antahkaran. And a polluted antahkaran topples the soul from its spiritual ascent, from *moksha*. Hence the shastras consider diet purity vital for spiritual progress.

In the *Vachanamrutam* (Gadhada I.18), the foremost shastra of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, Bhagwan Swaminarayan stipulates the need for purity of 'diet' for all the five *jnan indriyas*

– senses of perception. He says, “If the Jiva avails of a pure diet for the respective indriyas then the antahkaran will be pure. If the antahkaran becomes pure then the Jiva experiences unbroken rapport with God. And if the ‘diet’ of only one of the five indriyas is polluted then the antahkaran too is polluted. Therefore the reason for any discord experienced by a devotee of God is solely due to the ‘diet’ of the five indriyas, not the antahkaran.”

The ‘diet’ of the five indriyas are: sight for eyes, hearing for ears, smell for nose, taste for tongue and touch for skin.

Here there’s only scope to consider only food literally as diet for the tongue - *rasna indriya*. The fundamental criterion in observing diet purity is of *Abimsa* – non-injury.

### ***Abimsa* (Non-injury)**

The *Mahabharat* (Dvonnparva 165/29), the *Vasudev Mahatmya* (20/21), and *Padma Puran* (1.31.27) stipulate that *Abimsa* is the highest Dharma :

*Abimsa paramo dharma*

Bhagwan Swaminarayan echoes this in His *Shikshapatri*, the code of conduct for devotees (verse 12). He forbids killing any creature whatsoever (verse 11) and also forbids meat and alcohol (verse 15).

### ***Pap Karma* (Sin)**

The shastras consider the following as sinful:

“Anyone who assists animal slaughter, sanctions it, cuts the flesh, buys, sells or even serves it, is equally sinful as the one who slaughters the animal” (*Manu Smruti* 5.51).

The *Mahabharat* (*Anushasan Parva* 13.116.14) reveals the destiny of the meat-eater,

“‘One who desires to increase his own flesh by eating the flesh of others becomes eligible for Hell’, so declares Dharmatma Narad.”

A question is then posed to vegetarians; does not plucking

vegetables and grain amount to *himsa* or sin ? This enigma can only be resolved by having faith in the rishis who were inspired by God. They ordained a vegetarian diet which involved minimum *himsa* for man's survival. And for the minimum injury incurred, they stipulated atonement in the form of donating ten per cent of one's income to God.

The second criterion when considering diet purity is the inherent attribute known as *guna* of the food; whether it is *rajasic*, *tamasic* or *sattvic*. These attributes are classified by Shri Krishna in the *Gita* (17-8,9,10).

### 1) *Tamsic Diet*

The attribute of *tamo-guna* means a state of darkness, ignorance, lethargy and inactivity. When a person is in this state he is not in complete control of himself, for example, during bursts of anger and deep sleep. Although the act of being angry and the violence which may stem from it, is *rajo-guna*, being overwhelmed and blinded by it is *tamo-guna*.

Foods which either incite or increase *tamo-guna* are known as *tamsic*, such as: that which is old, stale, which has lost its basic goodness and flavour, half-cooked, which smells, is heavy to digest, very spicy, cold, partly eaten by somebody else, which contains bugs and hair, onions, garlic, asafoetida and animal flesh such as meat, fish and eggs.

### Animal Flesh

*A diet of animal flesh stimulates the indriyas, inciting the baser instincts in man. He is more prone to bursts of anger, hate and violence. His libido too is boosted. Hence he is overwhelmed by passion and craves to satiate his carnal desires. The net effect on the individual is mental discord and discontentment – ashanti. The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics opines that,*

*“The most serious indictment against flesh eating is that meat is a stimulant and its heating properties act upon the system by increasing*

*the power of the animal in man. By meat eating.... in other words, the temptation to sensuality of all kinds is strengthened. Moreover the benefit is not only relief from certain troublesome physical sensations but a marked purification of thought and desire.”*

*This observation is clearly reflected in the lives of those who eat meat compared to vegetarians. In the west bullying and violent behaviour is common in schools. Teenagers roaming the streets are more prone to violent behaviour such as kicking trashcans, smashing windows and damaging seats in public transport vehicles. Incidences of grievous bodily harm too, are high among the young in the west. Such behaviour is remarkably absent among vegetarian school children and young people in India. The calming, sattvic temperament accruing from a vegetarian diet is also reflected in animals. Herbivores are docile, whereas carnivores are innately aggressive and violent.*

### **Eggs.**

*Even unfertilised eggs are considered animal flesh. An egg has the genetic material capable of developing life. It breathes and metabolises – the two basic criteria for a living cell. It is also a product released from the reproductive system of an organism. Hence it is both tamasic and rajasic. An unfertilized egg is not ‘vegetarian’ as is fiercely touted by the Indian egg industry, to mislead the uneducated and gullible sections of society.*

*In a similar vein, some argue that milk too is not ‘vegetarian’ but an animal product. Agreed. However two aspects of milk render it sattvic. Firstly, it is a secretion borne by the love – vatsalya of the cow for its calf and not a product of the reproductive system like eggs. Secondly it is not a gametic cell and hence has no genetic material to produce life. There is no himsa committed in taking milk. These virtues render milk edible, sattvic and ‘non-sinful.’*

### **Garlic and Onion**

*Researchers in the west and even of Ayurveda may list a dozen*

health benefits of these two items. However, here one has to honour the wisdom of higher authorities; incarnations and shastras which forbid them. The Shiva Puran forbids alcohol, meat, onion and garlic. The Manu Smruti (5-5) declares, “The pap (sin) incurred by eating garlic, onions and inedibles is equivalent to that of drinking liquor.” Bhagwan Swaminarayan also forbids them (Shik\*. 62,63).

Despite being vegetables, garlic and onion are innately tamasic. Asafoetida too is forbidden in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Being an aphrodisiac, it is rajasic. Therefore their detrimental effects on the mind (subtle state) and spirit (causal state) far outweigh the health benefits to the physical body.

## 2) *Rajasic Diet*

There are six types of tastes – *rasa*: sweet, salty, bitter, sour, hot (spicy) and bland (*turo*). Excepting sweet foods, all are rajasic. Added to these, foods which are hot (in temperature), which induce unquenchable thirst (*lukha*), fried, roasted, boiled, spiced; which induce a burning sensation and the mouth to salivate such as cloves, cinnamon, chilli, pepper, etc., and those which induce pain, misery, apathy, depression and disease are rajasic. These also include items which alter normal consciousness, mood and mental poise, such as: alcohol, drugs, tobacco, aphrodisiacs, and caffeinated beverages (Shik.15,18). In the Hindu Dharma, drinking liquor is one of the *Panch Mahapapa* - five great sins (Manu 11.54). Anabolic and normal steroids and medications from chemical or vegetarian sources to treat disease are permissible.

## 3) *Sattvic Diet*

Those foods which are:

- nutritious e.g. milk, honey
- healthful and oily e.g. ghee, butter, vegetable oils and cooked vegetables

- *Sthir* – stable – which are easily assimilated by the body
- sweet e.g. sugary products
- tasty e.g. ghee, sugar and their products.

However, since a solely sattvic diet is not practical for the average individual, a balanced rajasic and sattvic diet conforms to diet purity.

#### Four types of Doshas :

Besides the three gunas of diet, there are four types of *doshas* - inherent failings of foods, which also need to be considered in diet purity. Such foods should be avoided as far as possible:

i) *Swabbhav Dosh* – those foods which are inherently impure or polluted such as: meat, eggs, alcohol, rotted or decayed. The *Manu Smruti* includes onions, garlic, Mushrooms and salagam (*Prorhiza campesnis vavapa* – a type of tuber and mushrooms in this classification. The probable reason in forbidding mushroom is that it is a saprophyte - that which grows on dead and decaying matter – This is not considered sattvic. Therefore green plants, which use natural, God-given elements such as light, water and air to make food using chlorophyll are considered sattvic.

ii) *Nimit Dosh* – Pure foods which are polluted by external factors and so become impure, such as: those made in the open bazaar (more relevant in India) in which macro organisms have entered, cooked food which has not been covered – in which insects, droppings, dust have fallen.

iii) *Asbraya Dosh* – the person cooking the food may not be of a pure character. His samskars may be evil. Or a person with undesirable samskars may have handled the cooked food, for example, the person serving the food. This *dosh* also includes the purity of the cooking vessel. It may have previously been used to cook non-vegetarian food. Also it may not have been washed before cooking.

\_The shastras cite numerous examples of *Asbraya dosh*.

Ekalshrunji rishi toppled from his pure path of austerities after being served rich, spicy, rajasic food by a prostitute. Another example of *Asbraya dosh* is food made by a woman during menses. Thirdly, during the Mahabharat battle, the staunch celibate and sage Bhishma, could not fight for righteousness, though aware of Shri Krishna's divinity. He attributed this to having eaten food of the unrighteous Duryodhan.

iv) *Swatwa Dosh* – This concerns the purity of an individual's wealth. The foodstuffs he buys may have been bought by money procured unethically; either stolen, gambled or by fraudulent means. The only money which is free of Swatwa dosh is that earned by the sweat of one's brow.

Of the four doshas for diet purity, the most important is Swatwa dosh.

In discussing diet purity as ordained by Hindu Dharma's shastras such as the Upanishads, Manu Smruti, Gita and Shikshapatri, the concept of the three gunas and the four doshas have to be incorporated in daily living. This can be classified into four categories:

1. Diet Purity in the Kitchen
2. Diet Purity in the Home Shrine
3. Personal Diet Purity and,
4. Diet Purity Relative to Time and Seasons.

#### **(A) Diet Purity in the Kitchen**

The following aspects should be adhered to :

- Milk, water and other liquids should be filtered (Shik.30).

This injunction, however, minor is as relevant today as it was prior to modern water treatments. In the summer of a news article appeared in London Daily Mail 10th July 1996, entitled, "Why water isn't kosher." It revealed the presence of tiny freshwater shrimps in tap water supplied by the Thames Water Authority! These are not killed by chlorine treatment. Though harmless to humans, *himsa* will be committed by drinking such

water. The article advised, “tying a fine cotton muslin over the tap”; a practice observed since ancient times in India!

Dry items such as flour and spices should be sieved to check for insects and maggot-like organisms, common in tropical climates.

- Fruits and vegetables should be washed properly, to remove: microscopic cysts of worms, pesticides and weedicides.

- When cutting or chopping fruits and vegetables, care should be taken to remove those infected with visible macro-organisms such as maggots and tiny caterpillars. These are common in aubergines (egg plant), peas and pigeon peas (*tmwar*).

- Cooked food should be covered, especially in warm climates where aerial insects are common. Those who keep pets such as cats or dogs should place cooked food in a suitable cupboard.

- If cooked items are to be stored in a fridge or freezer, a tentative expiry date should be written on the container, since some bacteria do survive and thrive even in cold conditions and produce toxins. Even if that item is reheated before eating, which may destroy the bacteria, the toxins still remain. This can lead to stomach upsets or food poisoning. In addition to the physical ill effects, this affects the mind and spirit by ritiating pran.

- Food colours used in cake creams and Indian sweets such as *jalebi* and *boondi*, should be of non-animal source. Indian housewives are seldom aware that the bright red liquid “cochineal” colour is derived by crushing a species of American cockroach! In India some powdered colours may have heavy metals, which result in long term side effects.

Freshly cooked food has prana, while old or tinned foods lack prana and also defile it. This is a probable factor in inducing lethargy and moodlessness after eating such foods. It takes more energy to digest it than if replenishes!

- Commercial food products such as fast foods, cakes,

chocolate, bread, ice cream, jelly and yogurt may have animal products such as eggs, gelatin, lard (pig fat) and egg lecithin – as emulsifier. Manufacturers do not always specify the type of emulsifier used. It may be either egg lecithin or soya lecithin. Lard is used in commercial breads to make them soft and to prolong shelf life.

- Commercially packed spice powders – *masalas*, especially for *paun-bhaji*, invariably have asafoetida – *hing*, as do commercial pompadoms. It is preferable to grind one’s own masalas from the dried, whole products to ensure purity. Unscrupulous merchants are known to adulterate chilli and *haldi* (turmeric) powders with coloured sawdust!

- Silver leaf, known as *varakh* used to decorate Indian sweets such as *barfi* and *kaju katri* is not “kosher” so to speak. The leaf is hammered thin by placing a silver nugget between sheep intestines! BAPS sanstha has banned its use since 1996. It should not be used even to offer decorative sweets in Annakut for Thakorji.

- A word of caution for jaggery – *gor*. Housewives invariably prefer the “beautiful pure” yellow variety than the brown *deshi* type which looks dirty. However to make the yellow type, most manufacturers use the following chemicals to ‘clean’ it: sodium bisulphite, oxalic acid, phosphoric acid, citric acid, detergent powder (!) and benzene (for whiteness!).

## (B) Diet Purity in the Home Shrine

- Time and faith – *shraddha* permitting, it is preferable for a person to have bathed and adorned fresh clothes prior to offering *thal*.

Prior to entering the room with the Home Shrine, if one removes footwear with one’s fingers, then one should wash the hands before touching the food dish.

- In cold countries or seasons, it would be preferable to

leave one's indoor footwear outside Thakorji's room or a good distance from the Ghar mandir.

- If possible, the utensils for *thal* (plate, cups, spoons etc.) should be of metal such as steel or silver, rather than china, glass or plastic. They should be used only for *Thakorji*. In an outdoor picnic, the thal may be offered in a new paper or plastic dish. Each item should ideally be placed in a bowl; items such as vegetables, rice and liquids, with a spoon in each. Fruits and salads may be decorated creatively. Ultimately, the Parmatma accepts one's *bhava* (*Gita* 9/26).

- Hot items should be cooled to an ambient temperature before offering; items such as: milk, *dal*, soup, *kbichdi* and fried items such as chips (French fries) potato *wadas* and *bhajiyas*. Blowing exhaled air to cool an item renders the thal impure and should be avoided.

- Water for Thakorji should be stored in a water pot/ container, specially set aside for Thakorji.

- One should sing at least one short *thal* verse. If time permits more may be sung. To familiarise and learn the tune and metre, one may play the thal cassette.

- While offering thal, one should not eat or taste any food items. If sitting cross-legged while singing the thal, the hands should not touch one's feet. Nor should one talk.

- After singing the thal verse, the food dish should be lifted and offered to Thakorji, followed by water. The sanctified *prasad* should then be mixed with the respective items in the kitchen, thus sanctifying all the food.

- Abroad and in homes which only avail one cooked meal in the evening, a light thal of *magas* or a similar sweet, or a dry or freshly cut fruit and warm milk may be offered to Thakorji in the morning, before leaving for work. Some devotees may choose to offer dry (home-made) snacks such as *chevado* or *sev* as well. These items should be stocked separately for Thakorji,

from which small portions are offered everyday.

It would be our exuberant bhakti and *vivek* to offer home-made foodstuffs rather than commercial products such as bread, biscuits, cakes, pizzas, *samosa*, *kachori* and so forth.

### (C) Personal Diet Purity

Many of the observances listed below have been advocated by stalwart rishis of Ayurveda such as Charak and Sushrut from their divine revelation, endeavours and experiences.

- Classified as *Asbraya dosh*, food or medications made by a sinful person or one whose character is not known, should be avoided (*Shik.* 31).

- Remove footwear and wash hands before starting a meal. Until recent times in India, it was customary to wash feet as well. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bhagwan Swaminarayan used to ritually bathe before every meal.

- Before the meal, with palms pressed together, chant a shlok, usually “*Shrimad Sadguna Shalinam...*” Mentally recall Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Pramukh Swami Maharaj to thank them for the meal. Swamiji firmly believes and advocates that all family members eat together at least during the main meal of the day. A zealous proponent for the survival and unbroken transmission of Hindu Dharma’s pristine traditions, he poetically exhorts people to observe: “*Bhasba* (learn the vernacular,), *Bhusba* (wear decent clothing), *Bhojan* (have vegetarian diet) and *Bhajan* (offer devotional worship to God) in accordance with our Hindu traditions.”

1. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has enjoined devotees to have food and drink only after offering Parmatma (*Shik.* 60).

2. Anger, anxiety, moodlessness and tiredness vitiate the digestive fire – *agni*. Therefore food should be eaten when one is at peace and when truly hungry.

3. On the path of spiritual endeavour, light meals are conducive. Bhagwan Swaminarayan once advocated this

principle after an amusing incident in Shiyal in Kathiawad. In the spring of 1815 CE, a severe frost solidified ghee. At the behest of devotees of Shiyal, Maharaj commanded everyone to avail themselves of the solid chunks of ghee. However, the unbridled gorging resulted in distress and agony! Bhagwan Swaminarayan then explained: “When eating food, leave space for *vayu* (air) and water. Over-eating leads to an imbalance of *vayu*, which pollutes *prana* (vital force/energy). This then affects the mind”. In the Gita (15/14), God considers the digestive fire, known as *Vaishwanar*, to be one of his forms – *Shakti*. Therefore one should respect it and not burden it. Hence availing food becomes a subtle form of bhakti.

4. Take small morsels and chew thoroughly. Do *smruti* of God and Guru while chewing. Food is venerated as *Annamaya Brahman*. Therefore one should not offer negative comments about an item which is not cooked to one’s taste nor leave extra food in one’s dish at the end.

5. Food which is inherently heavy to digest, known in Ayurved as *Vishmbhi* - causing constipation, should be avoided as a general rule. These include items made of *bajri* (millet) and plain flour. Constipation affects the mind and may disturb sleep. Hence the physical state affects the subtle – *sukshma* and causal bodies.

6. Ideally and with practice one should take small morsels using only the forefingers and thumb. For taking second helpings the left hand one should be used. The spoiled right hand should not touch ladles. Therefore it is also a ritual of purity to keep the left hand clean. To tear a chapati or *rotlo*, one should practice using the fingers of the right hand only, rather than using both hands. Children should be taught this in early childhood.

7. Drinking copious amounts of fluid while eating hampers digestion. Ayurveda advises one mouthful of liquid in the middle

of a meal and one at the end. More water can be drunk at least one and a half to two hours after a meal. Chilled drinks with food dampens the digestive agni. This in turn causes improper digestion, ultimately disturbing the *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha* equilibrium of the body, in addition to defiling prana. While drinking water, the glass should be held with the left hand rather than the spoiled right.

8. Schoolchildren living in the west, should avoid soft drinks from cans/bottles which have been previously 'lipped' and then offered to them by friends. Drinking water from spigots or taps which have been lipped, should also be avoided. In such cases an individual should take his own water from home.

In India this is doubly advantageous, since water in schools may often be contaminated with microbes of typhoid, hepatitis A, worms and dysentery, due to unclean or unlidded overhead water tanks.

9. During the day, when one drinks water the lipped glass should be washed, for use by the next person. A better habit, indigenous to India, is to drink water by raising the glass a few inches, without it touching the lips. This may seem a trifle amusing but it is traditional, religiously sound and hygienic.

10. Parents, especially mothers of schoolchildren should devote special time and interest to cook varied and nutritious food items for their children's packed lunches. If a child is told to make sandwiches everyday, he/she may get bored and may seek variety in the shops. This will probably amount to junk food, with a high sugar, fat and salt content. This may cause problems such as: obesity, nutritional deficiency and hyperactivity. The latter leads to a decreased attention span and concentration in class. He/she may then lag behind the average pupil, leading either to loss of self-confidence or apathy.

11. During illness a light diet is preferable, such as: *khichdi*, *mung dal* and soup. Heavy foods vitiate prana and delay

recuperation. The effects then spill over into the 'subtle' body causing mental discord.

Even diet or medications advised by a physician during illness, which flout the tenets of the *Shikshapatri*, such as eggs, meat, alcoholic syrups and so on, should not be taken.

12. Except in a bed-ridden illness, one should not eat while lying supine. Neither should one have food or drink before the morning bath and puja, except in extreme illness.

13. During *Ekadashi*<sup>1</sup>, a waterless fast is ideal. However those unable to fast may take liquids, or if needed *farari*<sup>2</sup> foods. Such fasting is an eternal Hindu tradition to please God, by controlling and curbing one's desires. Fasting once a fortnight eliminates the body's toxins and wastes. In turn this clears the mental apparatus, enhancing mental clarity and meditation. A clogged system leads to mood swings, malaise, laziness, lethargy and unhealthful oversleeping. Medical researchers do advocate fasting, on an average of once a week. Novices to fasting may initially experience headaches or/and nausea. These tend to clear up with regular fasting.

14. Except during festivals, one should avoid eating while moving about, as in buffet.

The Hindu shastras enjoin and consider it spiritually sound to sit cross-legged on a clean floor, in a peaceful area. This posture also boosts the digestive agni. Such practice should be encouraged and adopted rather than a table meal.

In essence an individual, believing himself to be *Akshar-rup*, offers food as *bhakti* to the Purushottam within, and not primarily the physical body. It is precisely for this reason – to maintain the purity of the bhakti ritual - that an item which has been partially eaten by somebody else is avoided. This ties in with point (8) above.

15. After having a meal one cleanses the mouth and swallows a little water before getting up, a purificatory ritual known

as *chalu*. Whenever a snack or a meal is availed, for example during long-distance travelling, the fingers should be rinsed with some water rather than dry-wiping with a paper napkin. In the absence of water, one is unable to rinse one's hands and perform *chalu*. For this reason, eating a sandwich or something similar on the street while strolling, does not conform to *ahar shuddhi* nor *bhakti* (ref. point 3).

16. The shastras enjoin that except in poverty or festivals, one should not eat food served in mandirs or a similar religious institution. One incurs a debt of the Deity. To repay the debt, one may offer donation or physical service.

Yogiji Maharaj has enjoined devotees to do 15 malas at night to repay debt incurred for the food eaten during the day, and to pray for the good of all those who made the meal possible; from the farmers who grew the raw produce to the cook.

### Miscellaneous items :

- a) In the *Shikshapatri* (verse 31), Bhagwan Swaminarayan forbids the intake of medications of animal origin and alcohol. These today include a wide range of products such as: cough and vitamin syrups, mouthwashes with alcohol, iron preparations from animal livers, and capsules of gelatin.
- b) Some cosmetics, perfumes, toothpaste and toiletries contain animal products or alcohol. It is preferable to use alternatives devoid of such ingredients.
- c) However it should be clarified that the Swaminarayan Sampradaya does not follow a vegan diet. Followers do use dairy products such as milk, butter and ghee.
- (d) Diet Purity relative to time and seasons :
  1. Food should not be eaten at sunrise and sunset (*Manu Smriti* 4-55).
  2. Food which is taken one and a half *pahor* (four hours) after sunset i.e. after about 11 p.m. is considered demonic –

*rakshasi* and should ideally be avoided.

3. The Hindu shastras forbid cooking and eating food during an eclipse (Shik. 86). Such food is regarded as impure. Furthermore, an eclipse has a detrimental effect on the digestive system.
4. One should not sleep right after a meal. Otherwise this vitiates prana and therefore the mind.
5. A light and minimally spicy meal at night is preferable. A meal of fermented or fried foods such as *dhokla*, *chutney*, bread, *bhajiyas*, *dhosa*, and similar items tend to induce unquenchable thirst. This may cause problems later at night, like acidity (heartburn), a rumbling gut or flatulence, leading to disturbed sleep and enervating dreams. This then spills over into the following day's activities; the first being the morning puja!
6. During *Chaturmas* – the four months of the monsoon, shastras forbid white radish, *mogri*, aubergines and sugar cane. The rishis have also advocated various types of fasts during this period since cloudy skies and humidity dampen the digestive agni. Therefore devotees observe *ektana* – one meal a day or *Dharna-Parna* during Shravan or even the whole of Chaturmas.

In addition to Ekadashis, fasting is also observed on *SbriHari Jayanti* – *Ramnavmi* and *Krishna Janmashtami*. *Farar* is traditionally availed on *Shivaratri*. In some groups and areas, women observe special fasts during the nine days of the *Navaratri* festival to please Shakti.

7. Around the end of Aso, the third month of Chaturmas, the new crops resulting from the recent rains are harvested. As a form of bhakti and thanking Parmatma for His grace, people first prepare sumptuous foods from this harvest. They offer these to Parmatma as *Annakut*, after *Diwali*. Depicting exuberant devotion, the greatest Annakut in the world is

the annual offered in the new Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, London. In the October 2000 Annakut, 1247 vegetarian dishes were offered, a record certified by the Guinness World Records.

8. Regular fasting imbues the mind immense strength and clarity. These benefits continue as long as a certain control is observed while breaking the fast; to prevent vomiting, indigestion and cramping. First a glass of ambient lemon juice with ginger should be sipped slowly. About two or more hours later a light meal of mung or khichdi would be preferable. The tendency to gorge should be curbed, for the Gita stipulates that one who observes moderation in diet attains *Yog-rapport* with God (6/17). Bhagwan Swaminarayan also advocates a decrease in food intake especially during youthhood when the boosted passions need calming (Vach. Loya 8).
9. Even *prasad* – sanctified food, which is not conducive to one's constitution should be avoided. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has ordained this in the *Satsangjivanam* (4.99.53). To consider a few examples: sweets for a diabetic, beans for those prone to flatulence, spicy foods for those prone to acidity (heartburn), and so forth. The latter two may increase the gut's motility or cause bloating, leading to the same sequence of events as in point 5 above.  
In case a non-farari *prasad* is served on *Ekadashi* or an auspicious fast, one should not eat it. The *Satsangi-jivanam* does not regard this as disrespectful (4.99.51).
10. Certain foods and vitamin supplements induce allergies or insomnia. These should be avoided; for instance, a sugar-laden item, fruits or juice late at night. One to two hours after consumption, the sugar in the fruit or juice is converted to glucose, which acts as a stimulant for the brain. Hence, just at the onset of sleep the glucose kick-starts the brain.

Additionally, rajasic foods such as cream, butter, cheese or ghee in the evening boosts the passions and are liable to induce undesirable dreams. This is especially poignant for those practicing brahmacharya according to Bhagwan Swaminarayan (*Satsangjivanam*. 4.99.56).

## Conclusion

Such profound ideals of diet purity advocated by the Hindu shastras collectively inspire man to live a 'samskarised' life. Western medical science has only just begun to recognise the effects of food or rather certain food chemicals, only on the mind. However the Vedic seers revealed the profound effects on the spirit. Case in point cited earlier, Ekalshrungi rishi skewed from his path of spiritual endeavour when he availed food cooked by an immoral woman. Hence the seers cautioned the aspirant to be fastidious, stringent and wary of his dietary habits. For this, Bhagwan Swaminarayan (*Sat*. 4.99.70, 71) declares that the *rasna indriya* has to be subdued, which then conquers the other senses, mind and antahkaran. And the *rasna indriya* is only subdued by strict observance of Dharma relating to diet as discussed. This ultimately eradicates the *vasanas* and stills the mind, leading one to ultimate salvation by becoming *Brahmanised* and realising Parabrahman.

# Faqs

## Namaskar

1. Why do we do *namaskar* instead of shaking hands when we meet somebody ?

*Namaskar* comes from the word *namaha* in Sanskrit, meaning 'to bow'. In *namaskar* we press our palms together and then bow our head and upper body to the person we meet. Also known as *pranam*, this is Sanatan Dharma's lofty ritual of greeting. It naturally makes us humble. And humility has an immensely benevolent effect on the opposite person. It instantly makes him comfortable. He will feel like talking to us. Even if he is egoistic, angry or in a bad mood, he will calm down for a few moments.

Our ancient rishis were experts on human psychology. So they advocated this ritual of *namaskar* because it effectively connects us to the person opposite. More important is that this method protects us from any undesirable vibrations of the opposite person. It also protects us from any bacteria or viruses stuck on his hands, which would be the case if we shook his hand. This was observed by scientists in the early 1980s at the university of British Columbia, in Canada.

So by doing *namaskar* instead of a handshake, we gain respect, humility and health.

## Abhivadan

*Abhivadan* is also *namaskar*, except we utter a sacred mantra or phrase at the same time. For example people utter such phrases as : 'Jai Siya Ram' ! 'Jai Shri Krishna' ! 'Jai Swaminarayan' ! 'Jai Ambe' ! 'Jai Jinendra' ! (to Jains), 'Jai Julelal' ! (to Sindhis).

## 2. Why should we not let our feet touch books ?

Books represent knowledge. The deity of knowledge is Saraswati. Touching books or kicking somebody's school bag

which contains books is considered sinful. It shows our disrespect for Saraswati. The bad karma of kicking or nudging a book with our feet results in bad fruit; we do not gain knowledge. Our education suffers. We get less marks in school.

Similarly we do not let feet touch any musical or educational instrument. We respect every object from which we gain knowledge. Children in India respect even new note books, pens, pencils, etc. by taking them to their nearest mandir so that the *pujari* may sanctify them at Bhagwan's feet. If our feet accidentally touch a book or even a person, then we mentally pray for forgiveness, as well as ritually bow down and touch that person's feet as a gesture of our regret and also ask him to pardon us. This ritual of touching the feet is known as *charan sparsh*. This humility will develop our character immensely. Additionally, knowledge becomes useful for only he who is humble, according to the Sanskrit *sutra* (aphorism) *vidya vinayena sbobbhate*.

## Charan Sparsh

3. Why do we either touch the feet of or do *dandvats* to sadhus and elders ?

Touching feet is known as *charan sparsh*. This is Sanatan Hindu Dharma's lofty ritual of respect and reverence for sadhus and elders. By their meditation, self discipline, *tapas*, spiritual wisdom and experience, they possess divinity. By offering *dandvats* or doing *charan sparsh* we are blessed by them. Their divinity flows into us through their feet, as well as when they touch our heads while giving *ashirvad* (blessings). We become noble hearted and more pure.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj requests children to do *panchang pranams*, to their parents and any other elders such as grand parents, uncles and aunts living in our house, every morning after one's *nitya puja*. If parents have left for work, then children

should do panchang pranams to them in the evening when they return. This ritual is in accordance with Vedic injunctions :

*Matru devo bhava* - venerate one's mother as a *deva*.

*Pitru devo bhava* - venerate one's father as a *deva*.

*Acharya devo bhava* - venerate one's teacher as a *deva*.

*Guru devo bhava* - venerate one's spiritual guru as a *deva*.

Such veneration also necessarily means that we should happily obey all their *agnas* and wishes. We should not argue with them nor shout at them. Do what pleases them. Do not behave in a way which hurts them, since the Bhagwan in their hearts too is hurt. Calling them names or by nicknames is absolutely disrespectful, to the extent that it is sinful. It does not please our Guru.

We learn about these great ideals of respect and reverence from scriptural stories about the child devotee Prahlad, Nachiketa, Dhruv, Shravan and Satyakam Jabali.

In the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha we are also inspired to behave in such a manner from the childhood stories of : Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, Bhagatji Maharaj, Shastriji Maharaj, Yogiji Maharaj and Guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

### Why do santos wear saffron coloured robes ?

Saffron is like the color of fire. This fire can burn away all worldly desires in a person, as the Santos have burnt away all attachments and renounced.

### What do Hindus believe?

There are principle 4 beliefs of Sanatan Dharma. They are:

1. *Avatarvad* : Manifestation of God on earth. God Himself incarnates on earth in various forms to establish *dharm*a and grant liberation.

2. *Murti Puja* : Worship of God's images and His different

manifestations. Consecrated images represent the presence of God which is worshipped. The images help devotees offer their devotion to God.

3. **Law of Karma** : Karma means action. This means we receive the good and bad fruits of our past actions now, and we also have to bear the good and bad fruits of our present actions in the future.

4. **Punarjanma** : (Rebirth). Our jivatmas are born and reborn in one of the 8,400,000 species until we attain *moksh*.

### **Why should we wash our hands after removing our shoes outside a mandir or home shrine ?**

Before entering a mandir or any holy shrine, Hindus remove their footwear outside. In India's warm climate, people usually wear slippers which can be slipped off without using hands. However for those who wear shoes and footwear with strings, buckles, straps or velcro, one has to use one's fingers. All footwear is regarded as not pure, including one's feet. Yes, to perform any holy ritual one then has to rinse one's hands with water. No need for soap. Water is regarded as Varun deva, whose touch purifies.

Our hands need to be ritually pure inside the mandir because : we may touch a holy text, a book of kirtans or prayer, perhaps light a divo or incense stick, place some flowers or fruit before the deity, perhaps take prasad given by the pujari and if an opportunity arises, touch the feet of sadhus. For all these holy and religious rituals it would be our religious duty and respect if we rinsed our hands after touching footwear, after touching our mouths after having prasad or any other food and ideally even after repeatedly cleaning one's nose with a handkerchief or tissue if one has a bad cold. In the west people worry about not shaking hands with somebody who has a cold, for fear of catching on infection. Similarly, we should also think about the

ritual purity of our hands before we enter a place of worship. That is why in many mandirs and shrines there are washbasins nearby. If it is just not practically possible to rinse our hands with water after removing footwear, then we should try to avoid touching holy objects.

How should we follow the rules of Vegetarianism ?

By thinking deeply about the following points :

(1) It is Bhagwan Swaminarayan's command in the Shikshapatri and so as His true bhaktas, we should aim to please Him.

(2) It is also our Guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj's command and wish to be a strict vegetarian. To earn his blessings, we should do that which pleases him and not to do that which would hurt him.

(3) All creatures on earth have a right to a free life. Therefore we should worry about the miserable life that cows, pigs, chickens, etc. have to spend in small pens or cages just for the sake of satisfying taste of people who eat them.

(4) Think of the sin (*paap*) committed by the person who kills the animal, who processes it, packs it, transports it, sells it and cooks it. Each commits sin equally. For this, he will suffer later in this life or in the next, This is mentioned in the *Manu Smruti*.

(5) Practically as vegetarians, we should carefully read labels on food packets, chocolate wrappers and tins for ingredients which are not suitable for us; such as, gelatin, egg lecithin, egg powder, asafoetida (*hing*), garlic or onion powder, etc.

(6) by not eating commercial foodstuffs at all, and not eating in restaurants.

(7) eating foods made at home, by satsangi friends and relatives and at the mandir.

What is the glory (*mabima*) of Ekadashi ?

The origin and details of Ekadashi are given on p??.

Sanatan Dharma's shastras sing immense glory of Ekadashi :

- **Padma Puran** (*Brahmakhand* 15/2-4)

“Just by uttering or hearing the word “Ekadashi”, *Yamdut* (demons of *Yampuri*-hell) are frightened. If one keeps awake on the night of Ekadashi and if puja of Bhagwan is performed with tulusi leaves, then a person attains the *punya* of one crore (ten million) *yagnas*.

- **Garud Puran** (1/127/12)

“If the whole earth is placed as donation on one pan of a weighing scale, and the Ekadashi fast on the other, then the fast is greater than donating the earth.”

- **Unnamed text**

“The fruit of one sixteenth part of an Ekadashi is greater than the merit from 1000 *Ashwamedh yagnas* and 100 *Rajsuya yagnas*.”

- **Brahmanand Swami**

The *punya* from the donation of one crore (10 million) cows is less than one sixteenth part of the fruit of one Ekadashi.

How should we do darshan ?

Bhagwan Swaminarayan has described how to do Bhagwan’s darshan in *Vachanamrut Sarangpur 2*. He says that He is pleased on devotees who do darshan in the following manner :

(1) by concentrating one’s attention totally on Bhagwan, but not looking at other objects which may accidentally come in the way, such as a bird or animal.

(2) by doing darshan as if it is our first occasion, with great divine *bhav* and *mahima*.

(3) then record this darshan in one’s heart and visualise it again and again. Shriji Maharaj then gives the ideal example of Queen mother Kushalkunverbai of Dharampur. She did Maharaj’s darshan in this manner.

(4) To remember this darshan everyday.

We should not do darshan speedily and then zoom off, without remembering the type of garments and ornaments adorned by Bhagwan.

## Ten Practical Tips for Doing Better Darshan. (In Box)

(1) Start darshan by observing the *shangar* on the head. What is the name of the adornment ? Is it a *pagh* or *safo* or *mugat* ? Is there a *chhoglu* on the pagh/safo ? Are there *toras* of beads hanging from the pagh/safo ? Is there a *kalgi* (feather) and pendant inserted in the safo ? What is the shape of the pendant ? It's often a colourful bird such as a peacock.

The most appropriate Gujarati word (adjective) for “doing” darshan is *maanavu*. Its nearest English equivalent is “to savour”. Hence for Bhagwan, we should “savour” His darshan, rather than “doing” His darshan.

(2) Then take one's *drashti* (vision) downwards, to the ears, neck, upper and lower half of the body, hands, ankles and lotus-feet. What shape are the *kundal* on the ears ? Fish (*meen*), peacock (*mayur*) or crocodile (*makar*) ? Or are there simple ear-rings ?

(3) Names of the appropriate ornaments should come to mind while doing darshan of each part. One should whisper the name to oneself. This helps you to remember the *shangar* later.

**Names of ornaments :** *kanthalo* (around the neck), *baar* (garland/necklace), *kadaa* (locket around the wrist), *ponchi* (on the palms), *vedh viti* (gem-studded rings on the fingers), *kandoro* (at the waist), *toda* (around the ankles), *zaanzar* (decorative chain on the feet), *nang* (gems on each toe), *chbadi* (decorative gold or silver stick).

**Names of garments :** *jamo*, *kediyu*, *khes* or *dopatto*, *surwal*, *dhotiyu*.

(4) Examine the texture, colour, folds, pleats and pattern of the garments. One can recognise velvet and satin (*pitambar*) easily. Often, the pujari santos may choose a particular colour theme for the shangaer. For example the *khes*, handkerchief and ear-rings may be of the same colour to match that of the garments. Or are they in contrasting style ?

(5) Examine the *mukharvind* (face), *netra kamal* (lotus eyes), the nose, *mukha kamal* (lotus lips) and the slight smile, the beautiful *tibakdi* (black mole) on the right cheek, *hastakamal* (lotus hands), *charankamal* (lotus-feet). Observe devotionally and carefully the contours of the fingers and toes, and the pink or reddish nails. What is the *mudra* of the right and left hands ? Shriji Maharaj's left hand will have *abhay mudra*. Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami's will be different.

(6) If there is a *mugat* on the head, then ask yourself what *tithi* (day) is it ? Is it ShriHari Jayanti, Ekadashi, Punam or Amaas ? If there is a shield, a sword and a dagger as well, then the day is Amaas. This is the darkest and last day of the Hindu lunar month. Bhagwan is symbolically decorated to fight evil.

(7) Observe in detail the flowers in the garlands. Can you name the flowers ? This will also help you remember the darshan later. In India one can tell what season it is from the flowers : roses usually in winter and spring, *mogaro*, *dolar* (jasmine species), *guldavadi* (chrysanthemum) and *bajari* (marigold) in the summer. In the mandirs abroad, one may see red or white carnations in the summer. Perhaps a *guchchb* of daffodils and tulips in the spring.

(8) Is there a special *pichhvai* (back curtain) behind the murtis ? If there is no *pichhvai*, can you spot the different shapes carved in the golden *sinhasan* ? *Suryadev*, *Chandradev* (as a deer), etc.

(9) Try to use all the 5 senses while doing darshan – eyes, ears, touch, smell and taste. Can you identify the fragrance in the *garbha grub* or mandir ? Is the incense (*agarbatti*) of sandalwood, or mogaro, or rose ? After arti, can you smell the burnt ghee from the divas ? In May-June in India, you can smell the exquisite fragrance of pure, natural sandalwood from the *chandan vagha*.

(10) So finally, breathe in the unique fragrance that pervades the whole mandir. The fragrance is always a special feature of

every mandir. Perhaps, as in India, the mogaro's exotic fragrance overpowers all other fragrances.

Such darshan soothes and boosts one's whole being – body, mind and atma !

### What is Thaal ?

*Thaal* can mean three things ; (i) the actual metallic plate, (ii) the food (*naivedya*) that is placed in it, for offering to Bhagwan and (iii) the collection of kirtans (poems) composed by the paramhansas which are sung while offering food. The underlying sentiment in offering *thaal* to Bhagwan is that we request Him to avail it and thereby fulfil our devotional *bhavna* (sentiments). Thus the now sanctified food is known as *prasadam* or just *prasad* in Gujarati. The word 'prasad' also signifies *krupa* - Bhagwan's grace. When we have food after it has become *prasad*, we are spiritually boosted.

### Why don't we out candles and cut cakes during birth days?

Sanatan Dharma's beliefs and rituals are based on enlightening the atma, about itself and about Parmatma. These beliefs consolidate *atmanishtha* rather than boost *dehabhav* - body consciousness. *Dehabhav* is a form of ignorance, known as *avidya-maya*.

Bearing these basic principles in mind, our rishis prescribed rituals in our daily lives. There is no reference in any *shastra* of their advocating blowing out candles or cutting cakes. These are rituals of the west. Blowing out, snuffing out candles leads to darkness. Hindu *samskruti* believes in lighting *divas* of ghee in front of Parmatma. Ghee is a pure *puja dravya*. The symbolism here is of enlightening the jivatma, rather than plunging it into darkness. Similarly, the underlying symbolism of "cutting" is of promoting *tamas abamkar*, meaning *himsa* (violence). This is contrary to Hindu philosophy. It promotes peace, harmony and

brotherhood, not discord and violence.

On many occasions, Pramukh Swami Maharaj has exhorted devotees abroad to offer delicious foods as *thal* to Thakorji to celebrate birthdays, and distributing these as *prasad* to relatives and friends, rather than snuffing out candles and singing the accompanying rhyme.

In any ritual, the basic aim is to offer bhakti to Bhagwan and Guru, rather than promoting *dehabhav*.

### **Instead of cutting a red ribbon, how should we perform the opening ceremony of a dwelling?**

By untying a knot of a *nada chhadi* taped on the doorway. The same symbolism of 'cutting' applies as cited in the previous question. The subtle symbolism of untying a knot, is that we untie or dissolve our 'knots', commonly known as *granthis*, before residing in the dwelling. *Granthi* means *vasana* - of ego, hate jealousy, anger, lust, greed and so on. Dissolving *granthis* leads to both external harmony and internal peace.

Pramukh Swami Mahraj always unties a knot of *nada chhadi* and we too should emulate him.

Further more, he also cracks a *shrifal* (dry coconut) on the floor of the doorway. This is after performing puja of Thakorji and imprinting red *chandlo* on the *shrifal*, while chanting *Shantipaath* and other Vedic mantras and *shloks*. The milk from the cracked *shrifal* is then sprinkled inside, as well as on those present, to confer purity and auspiciousness.

### **Why is *Ganesb puja* offered first in any Hindu ritual and venture ?**

Ganeshji (Ganpatiji) is the deity of *maangalya* - auspiciousness. He is invoked for the success of the venture or project. Mahadevji (Shivji) granted Ganeshji a boon that he would be invoked by people before embarking upon any project.

**Why should we not eat or drink anything which has been eaten or drunk by somebody else ?**

Something which is does not conform to the shastras' ideals of *ahar shuddhi* (*Yajnavalkya Smruti* 1-6-162). Eating a half-bitten fruit or sandwich or drinking juice from a container which has been lipped previously by somebody else, amounts to ritual impurity.

Essentially, when we eat or drink, we are ideally offering this to the Parmatma within. Therefore this should be pure. In BAPS Swaminarayan philosophy, we are offering the food both to Pramukh Swami Maharaj - who is our atma, and Bhagwan Swaminarayan who manifests in him.

**Unlike the usual murtis of Bhagwan, why are Shivlings and Shaligrams without arms or legs ?**

There are four types of forms which symbolically represent Parmatma.

(1) *Svaayambhu* - the self-born forms e.g. earth, river, fire, water etc.

(2) *Nirgun vigrah* - represents the formless (*nirakar*) and *nirgun* (without mayic attributes) form of Parmatma. e.g. Shaligram, Shivling, Dwadash Jyotirlings and *sopari* (betel nut).

(3) *Sagun vigrah* - represents the *sakar* (with shape) form of Parmatma. These include : *Chaturbhuj* (four-armed) Vishnu and *Panchmukhi* (five-faced) Shiv.

(4) *Avatar vigrah* - represents those who incarnated on earth in human form such as : Shri Ramchandra, Shri Krishna, Nrusinhji and Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

Since Shivling and Shaligram represent the *nirakar* form of Parmatma, the question of form does not arise. It is also because of this that they are not termed *murti*, but *ling* or *gram*. *Shali* means group of devas. *Gram* means the place where they reside.

Shaligram is worshipped by Vaishnavs who believe in the *nirakar* form of Vishnu.

**Why are *tulsi*, *bili* (*bilva*), *durva* (*darbh*) and *aakado* offered to Vishnu, Shivji, Ganeshji and Hanumanji, respectively ?**

Since Vishnu is a *sattvic deva*, he prefers *sattvic puja dravyas* such as : white woollen *asan*, tulsi mala and tulsi leaves (*Ocimum sanctum*), lotus, *kumkum* and white *chandana*.

Shivji is often offered worship to grant longevity, since he is the deva who offers protection from *Kal*. For longevity, the shastras advocate *bili patra* (*Aegle marmelos*), *dhantura* (*Datura stramonium*), rudraksh mala (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*) and *Tryambakam* mantra.

Ganeshji is the *deva* of *maangalya* - auspiciousness. He is offered *maanagalik puja dravyas* such as *ladus* and *durva* or *darbh* (*Cynodon dactylon*) - a type of stalky grass which has purifying properties.

Hanumanji represents *dasatva* - ideal servitude. He is the ideal servant - *bhakta* of Shri Ram. Shri Ram was offered the usual fragrant and beautiful flowers by devotees. Hence as ideal *sevak*, Hanumanji's lofty bhakti ideal dictates not to accept anything which was offered to Ram. The flower and plant that people avoided was the poisonous white *aakado* (*Calotropis gigantea*). Hence its white flowers and flower mala are usually offered to Hanumanji.

**Why is a morning bath preferable rather than one in the evening ?**

All staunch Hindus bathe in the morning. The Dharma shastras of Sanatan Dharma emphatically advocate *pratab snan* - morning bath. The *Manu Smruti* (2/176) stipulates an evening bath in addition to the morning bath. The reasons for *pratab snan* are :

(1) Night sleep renders ritual impurity to the body. Only a total immersion of the body with water purifies it.

(2) Only after such ritual purification with water, is the body eligible for the morning religious rituals such as *puja* and *arti*.

(3) Water boosts the body's *pran* and *pranic* fields. The Shrutis state that : *Apo vai pranaha*. i.e. water itself is *pran*. Hence a morning rinse with water infuses *chetna* (energy) in the body. A body suffused with such energy is able to function better. It removes the morning sluggishness and lethargy.

An evening bath is an added 'extra' but not an alternative. This question arises only for those influenced by the west. Those who sincerely wish to observe this ritual can do so anywhere in the world.

### Why should one bathe wearing a garment ?

The shastras advocate wearing a simple garment while bathing rather than being naked. There is a lofty underlying belief that water is itself a deity, *Varun deva*. Hence it is disrespectful to Varun by bathing naked. While bathing, the *shastras* also advocate chanting mantras invoking Bhagwan and remembering the seven holy rivers of Bharat :

*Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godāvāri Saraswati,  
Narmade Sindhu Kāveri jales-min sannidhim kuru.*

i.e. O Varun! Please reside in the waters of the following rivers : Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri.

BAPS followers also remember Bhagwan Swaminarayan, His 500 Paramhansas and the Guru parampara, all bathing in the rivers : Ghela in Gadhada, Und in Bhadra and Gondli in Gondal. It is also customary to chant the *Janmangal Paath*.

## Appendix-IV

The twenty-seven\* Nakshatras or Asterisms (constellations)

Asvini	(Asvinau - 3 stars)
Bharani	(Yamah - 3 stars)
Krittika	(Agnih - 6 stars)
Rohini	(Prajapatih - 5 stars)
Mrigasir	(Somah - 3 stars)
Ardra	(Rudrah - 1 star)
Punarvasu	(Aditih - 5 or 4 stars)
Pushy	(Brihaspatih - 3 or 7 stars)
Aslesha	(Sarpah - 6 or 5 stars)
Magh	(Pitarah - 5 or 4 stars)
Purva-Phalguni	(Bhagah - 2 stars)
Uttar-Phalguni	(Aryama - 2 stars)
Hasta	(Savita - 5 stars)
Chitra	(Tvashta - 1 or 6 stars)
Svati	(Vayuh - 1 star)
Vaisakh	(Indraghni - 5 or 4 stars)
Anuradha	(Mitra - 3 or 4 stars)
Jyeshth	(Indra - 3 stars)
Mul	(Nirritoh - 5 or 11 stars)
Purvashadh	(Apah - 2 or 4 stars)
Uttarashadha	(Vivedeva - 4 stars)
Sravana	(Vishnu - 3 stars)
Dhanishtha	(Vasava - 3 or 4 stars)
Satabhisha	(Varun - 3 or 100 stars)
Purva-Bhadrapada	(Aja Ekapad - 2 stars)
Uttar-Bhadrapada	(Ahirbudhnyah - 2 stars)
Revati	(Pusha - 3 or 32 stars)

# Appendix-1

## The Story of Ekadashi.

In Vach. Gadhada II. 8. Bhagwan Swaminarayan has related the story of *Ekadashi*.

Once Bhagwan Narayan was resting. A demon named Murdanav came and challenged Him to a duel. Suddenly a damsel appeared, evolved out of the *Ekadash indriyas*<sup>1</sup> of God. Murdanav was so attracted to this damsel that he asked her to marry him. The damsel agreed, but only if he agreed to a duel with her, “Whoever shall defeat me shall marry me.” Blinded by passion, he fought with her. The damsel killed him. Pleased with her, Narayan granted her a boon. She asked, “O Prabhu! As I manifested from your *Ekadash indriyas*, let my name be *Ekadashi*. I am wedded to *tapas* and I desire that people should observe the *Ekadashi Vrata* (fast) and control their *Ekadash indriyas* on this day. Bhagwan Narayan agreed. Ever since, Hindus fast on the eleventh day of *Sud (Shukla) Paksha* and *Vad Paksha* of the month.

- The ideal Ekadashi.

In Vach. Gadhada I, 38, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has elaborated that a true *Ekadashi* is when one withdraws the ten *indriyas* and the eleventh the mind, from their worldly ‘foods’ and focuses them on God and devotional activities. So moderation in daily leisure activities is also desirable.

1 The ten *indriyas* (sense organs) comprise the five karma *indriyas* (speech, hands, feet, anus and genital organs) and five *Jnan indriyas* (eye, ears, nose, skin and tongue). The ten *indriyas* along with the mind are collectively known as *Ekadash indriyas*.

## Appendix-2

### Daily Rituals of Satsangis (Swaminarayan Followers)

The rituals of bhakti listed below are generally observed by Satsangis worldwide.

- 1 Morning bath followed by Puja.
- 2 Arti and thal in the Ghar mandir.
- 3 Visiting mandir for Dev darshan – time and distance permitting.
- 4 Midday – Offering thal in the Ghar mandir.
- 5 Visiting mandir for *Sandhya Arti* or/ & Arti and thal in the Ghar mandir.
- 6 Ghar Satsang after dinner for half an hour or more; reading and discussing Sampradaya's literature.
- 7 Singing *Nitya-Cheshta* after the Ghar Satsang or before retiring to bed.

### Daily Satsang

- In all *shikharbaddh* mandirs, sadhus deliver a scriptural discourse (*katha*) every morning, which is attended by those devotees whose personal schedules permit it.
- During *Dhanurmas* (from 15th Dec. to 14th Jan.) devotees visit the shikharbaddh mandir to chant the Swaminarayan mantra in the form of Dhun, every morning after *Mangala arti* to *Sbrungar arti*.

### Weekly Satsang

Devotees attend their nearest Satsang centre/mandir one evening during the week, for a two-hour Satsang gathering and on Sunday evenings, generally from 5 to 7 p.m. At the end, the whole assembly prays by chanting the *Swaminarayan Dhun* for: the speedy recuperation of those who are ill, the recently deceased, those afflicted by a natural calamity (if any), and

peace and harmony in the country of residence, and the world.

Yogiji Maharaj initiated the Sunday Satsang for the whole family, including children. Pramukh Swami initiated the mid-week Satsang, one evening from 9 to 10.30 p.m, generally for adults.

In addition to being religious assemblies, these also simultaneously consolidate social connectedness. This is especially important for people who live in isolated places.

## Appendix-3

The Sadhu Tradition in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya

*“There is no greater status than that of the sadhu”*

- Bhagwan Swaminarayan (Vach.Gadhada II.22.)

A vibrant legacy flourishing in the Hindu Dharma since time immemorial is asceticism, known as *sannyas*.

The *Vasudev Mahatmya* (23.30) of the Skand Puran and the *Satsangijivanam* (5.39.4-8) cites four types of sannyasis; *Kutichak*, *Bahudak*, *Hansa* and *Paramhansa*. These entered sannyas after fulfilling the marriage duties. However there existed another category of ascetics; the *bal brahmachari* who renounced home at an early age rather than undergo vivaha. For example, Adi Shankaracharya and Bhagwan Swaminarayan. In essence this samskara was ‘Vivaha’ with the Divine. Continuing this latter tradition, Bhagwan Swaminarayan introduced the following four types of ascetics in the early 19th century: *Paramhansas*, *brahmacharis*, *sadhus* and *palas* (*parshads*). All were *bal brahmacharis* - celibates from birth, except a few Paramhansas, who arrived after renouncing *grubasth ashram*.

After His departure, the initiation into Paramhansas discontinued. Today, His fifth spiritual successor, Pramukh Swami Maharaj continues the tradition initiating young men who are *bal brahmacharis*. Therefore this is not the classical form of sannyas, rather a special variant in which an individual bypasses the *gruhastha ashram*, to enter sannyas straight from the *brahmacharya ashram*.

The BAPS sanstha’s sadhu training centre is based in its Sarangpur mandir, near Botad, housing between 150 to 200 renunciates. At the age of 17, a youth becomes eligible to enter a year’s training, as a *sadbak*. During this period he is guided about the Sampradaya’s shastras, worship and devotional rituals.

Simultaneously he strengthens himself through self-discipline, *prayashchitta*, self-abnegation and austerities. He observes a minimum of five fasts a month, sleeps on the floor, washes utensils, cleans the ashram, chops vegetables for meals and performs similar forms of service, known as *seva*.

In addition to the ashram's teachers, Pramukh Swami Maharaj and the senior sadhus frequently arrive to offer spiritual counselling and sermons. After training, the sadhak obtains written parental consent to become a sadhu. Pramukh Swami Maharaj then initiates him, along with others in a forthcoming *mahotsav*. During the *diksha-vidhi*, he is given *upavit (janoi)* of 3 strings. Swami anoints his forehead, chest and upper arms with sandalwood paste and gives him a Guru-mantra. Now known as a *parshad*, he adorns white robes for about one year, during which he undergoes further training. He then receives the *Bhagvati diksha*, adorning saffron robes. His new sadhu name ends with *das*, meaning 'servant' of God, as a constant reminder to imbibe humility.

As a sadhu, he undergoes a further five-year training program, which now includes cooking and puja of the murtis in the *garbha-gruha* of the mandir.

Both the parshad and sadhu orders observe the *Panch Vartaman* stipulated by Bhagwan Swaminarayan in the *Dharmamrut* (ref.p.xiv). When travelling, both orders do so in pairs, unlike the sannyasi who peregrinates alone.

After completion of the five-year training, the sadhus are allocated life-long duties by Pramukh Swami in other mandirs or areas. Those skilled in vocal or instrumental music, writing or languages may be instructed to pursue further training or studies, as the case may be. However, a sadhu's lifelong *sadhana* is to imbibe attributes of *sadbuta*-saintliness. For this the Guru, Pramukh Swami remains the ideal.

With an average of 30 youths initiated every year, the total

number of sadhus in Pramukh Swami's retinue today is 676\*. His order of sadhus remains unique in the Hindu Dharma for its strict vows of *Ashtang* (eight-fold) *brahmacharya*.

# Appendix-4

## 20 minute Veg. Delights for Students

For Hindu students living away from home, cooking nutritious, scrumptious and filling meals need not be time consuming. The meals below can be whipped up in less than 20 minutes and easily conform to the ideals of Ahar-Shuddhi discussed in Ch.16. The added benefit, besides being economical, is that salt and fats can be controlled. Another important concept worth considering is that pre-cooked or commercial foods have little prana. Therefore after eating them, a student may experience lethargy or moodlessness. These time robbers are a bane in tight academic curriculums.

Exam stress too affects students. Research reveals that they are more prone to illnesses before exams. During this critical period, healthful and tasty meals combat stress, rather than 'quick bites', to save time. A satiated stomach and a mind appeased by delicious and nutritious dishes cooked by the student himself, leads to effective stress management.

### Minimum utensils to be purchased:

- 1) Small steel pressure cooker (3 litre) preferable, since an aluminium vessel reacts with sour foods.
- 2) Non-stick pot for heating liquids.
- 3) Non-stick pan with handle for roasting *bbakbri*.
- 4) Round steel dish. Serves 2 purposes: i) Inverted - to roll *bbakbri*. ii) To offer food for *thal*.
- 5) Flat rolling pin, rather than the traditional Indian one which needs skill.

### Maximum spices needed:

Cloves, cinnamon, *jeeru* (cumin) seeds, *haldi* (turmeric), red chilli powder, *shak masala*, *methi* (fenugreek), dry or fresh *dhana*

(coriander) and *limdi* leaves; and fresh ginger (for *kadhi*). For *vaghar* - cotton-seed or sesame seed oil is preferable or whatever is available.

## Ten Golden Culinary Tips

Since a detailed account is not possible here, a simplified method of *vaghar* is given in box opposite. The amount of water to be used should be learnt from one's mother. *Dal* (curry) and *chapatis* (*rotli*) have purposely been omitted, since they are time consuming. First, glance at the table on p.170.

1. The secret and beauty of whipping up the above meals is the pressure cooker. Even for pulao! There's no fuss of stirring, especially vegetables, nor the anxiety of the food remaining half-cooked. Equally important is that the spicy aroma uniformly pervades the food.

2. Instead, *jeera bhakbris* can be made easily, even by an amateur. To save time they should be made in a large batch during spare hours, say on weekends. To enhance taste and melt-in-the-mouth crumbliness, use extra oil or ghee, salt and roasted, semi-ground jeeru. The *bhakbris* should be roasted at low heat, to near - biscuit crispiness, then cooled and stored. This batch can last a whole week. Prior to eating everyday, they can be warmed in a microwave. The reason for adding barley and corn to wheat flour is that in addition to enhancing taste, they add extra soluble and insoluble fibre.

3. Since white bread and pitta bread (*nan*) are made of plain flour, it is healthful to avoid these.

4. Like *khichdi*, the soup is also easily made using the pressure cooker. The chopped vegetables/tomatoes are placed in the cooker, after the *vaghar*. After cooking, the contents are pulped with a blender. Hot water may be added for a thinner consistency.

5. Cooking need not be done everyday. The items can be

prepared in larger quantities to last 3 to 5 days and stored in the fridge. At meal times, portions from the stock can be re-warmed in a microwave.

6. To whip up *shak* in less than 10 minutes, cook frozen vegetables in a microwave instead of a pressure cooker. Only a little *vaghar*, *shak masala*, salt and sugar (tomato puree/sauce optional) need to be blended into the thawed vegetables, before placing in the microwave.

7. *Chhas* (thin buttermilk) is preferable to milk, since the latter produces mucous (catarrh) in the body. *Kadhi* can be prepared in under 12 minutes. It is extremely therapeutic for those prone to colds, hayfever, sinusitis, asthma, coughs and colitis. The key ingredients are fresh ginger and *methi* (fenugreek seeds). To make the *kadhi* more delicious, add a ripe, chopped banana at the outset, just after *vaghar*.

8. Avoid eating incompatible food combinations. The most common practice abroad, is milk and cereal washed down with fruit juice. Ayurved considers milk and fruits incompatible.

9. To balance the sourness of the tomatoes in any recipe, sugar is needed. Fruit such as apples or dates provide sugar in natural form, obviating the need for table sugar.

10. If vegetables are placed in cold water and brought to boil, more than half the vitamin C is lost. Therefore add the vegetables when the water is boiling. Only then close the pressure cooker lid.

### Simplified 5-step Vaghar

1. *At medium gas, heat 5 tsf oil\* (more if cooking in quantity).*
2. *Add the following:*  
*3 cloves, 1 stick cinnamon, 1 tsf jeeru*
3. *As soon as the jeeru starts sizzling, add (if available) : shredded ginger/green chilli/limdi leaves.*
4. *Pour water, increase heat & bring water to boil.*

5. *Add all the foodstuffs, including turmeric, masala, salt, sugar/ jaggery. Stir lightly & close lid.*
- \* *For kadhi, use ghee instead of oil, plus methi in step 2.*

## Veg Delights for Students

### Cooking Details for Items 1 to 6 in table opposite

Amounts are for 2 servings - the maximum capacity of a 3 litre pressure cooker.

1. Swaminarayan Khichdi
    - 1 fistful Basmati rice } wash & soak for 10 mins.
    - 1 fistful dal (Mung)
    - 3 cupfuls mixed, chopped vegetables.
    - To vaghar (see p.169), add 5 cupfuls water. Bring to boil. Add the veggies & grain.
    - Add 3 tsf salt,  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsf turmeric. Stir lightly. Close lid of cooker. Heat till steam vents twice ( 2 “whistles”). Switch off and leave to simmer for 10 mins. If in hurry, cook for 3 “whistles”, then cool rapidly under tap.
  2. Mixed Vegetable Pulao.

All steps as (1) above, except : omit dal, use 2 fistfuls rice and 4 cupfuls water. Instead of turmeric add 1 tsf powdered black pepper.
  3. Mixed Vegetable Shak

All steps as above and omit rice and dal. Use 2 cups water, 2 cupfuls crushed tomatoes or  $\frac{1}{4}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup puree. Sugar optional, to adjust the sourness. Add 1 tsf masala.
  4. Spicy Apple Shak

All steps as in (1) then (3).
  5. Mixed Vegetable Paunwa
- Preparation Time : Less than 8 mins!

### Amount for one youth.

- 3 cupfuls *paunwa* - thick, flufly type for making *chevado*.
- 2-3 cupfuls frozen mixed vegetables (peas, carrots, potatoes).  
Thawed in 1
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup oil for *vaghar* (seasoning)
- 1/2 tsf lemon juice (commercial) or 1-2tsf freshly squeezed.
- 1 tsf salt

Spices - 1/2 tsf *rai* (mustard seeds) 1 tsf *jeeru* (cumin), 1/2 tsf *halder* (turmeric) chili (optional)

### Method

- 1 Wash the *paunwa* 3 times with water and drain the water. Leave to soak.
- 2 *Vaghar*. Heat the oil at low gas. First add *rai* until it sizzles, followed by Stir. Then add the nuts and raisins till the raisins inflate. Then add salt. Then add the *paunwa* and vegetables. Mix contents carefully with crushing the *paunwa* are uniformly yellow, switch of coriander (*dbhana*) leaves & pomegranate if available, for a colourful mouthwatering look. Lid the vessel.
- 3 Offer to Thakorji. Adjust salt to personal taste.

### NB.

- If frozen mixed vegetables are not easily available (e. g. for students in sized potatoes and 1 carrot in a pressure cooker (2 vents). Then chop traditional Gujarati bateta paunwa.
- If the youth needs something extra to calm the growling in the stomach with vegetable soup, *vaghareli chhas*, *rab* or even *kadhi* - for those with

### Health features.

- This rice-based meal is *sattvic*, satiating and yet light to digest.

- it does not cause mucous (*aam* or *kapha*), acidity (*pitta*), indigestion constipation.
- It is a well-balanced, wholesome meal in itself.
- It is ideal for diabetics who wish for a snack with high complex carbohydrates, protein and fat, and plenty of vitamins and natural fibre. Replace the sugar with aspartame.
- Just *paunwa* on their own are ideal during an illness when light foods are advocated by Ayurved.
- It tastes just as delicious when cold.
- Without a speck of doubt, this snack is 100% more healthier than a bread: one with lettuce or tomato.

Students and pilgrims travelling long distances in India may have to spend up to 1/2 Besides the usual *dhebra*, *puri* etc. they can easily whip up and relish *paunwa* (without the train!)

One only needs to take dry *paunwa* and the *vaghared* oil - with all the spices, salt dissolved in it - cooled and bottled. One can prepare the paunwa in a strong plastic carrier bottled water: After they are soaked, pour in the oil and mix in the bag using one's hands. No need for utensils!

## 6. Mixed Vegetable/Tomato Soup

All steps as in (1), except use 6 cupfuls water. After opening cooker liquify using a blender. Add water for thinner consistency. Add salt to taste.

## 7. Rab

- Heat 6 tsf jaggery in 2 glassfuls water, until jaggery dissolves. Switch off gas.
- Simultaneously, in another small utensil, stir and roast the flour in the ghee at low-medium heat. Flour will be roasted under 40 secs., recognisable by the typical roasted fragrance. Then stir in the powdered spices, followed by the hot jaggery water. Increase heat and stir for 1 min.

# Glossary

(Pr. - Pronunciation)

**Ahawan** Invocation. (Pr. *Abawaan*)

**Ahimsa** Non-violence in thought, word and deed. (Pr. *Ahimsaa*)

**Aksharbrahma(n)** One of the five eternal realities. Also, the Ideal devotee of *Parabrahman* -Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

**Akshardham** Abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

**Antahkaran** Aggregate of *manas*, *buddhi*, *chitt* and *ahamkar*.

**Archaswarup** Worshipful murti. (Pr. *Archaaswarup*)

**Arti** Ritual of worship by waving *divas* (*deeps*) (Pr. *Arti*)

**Asan** A seat e.g. a mat for sitting in *Puja*. (Pr. *Aasan*)

**Ashtang** Eight parts of the body. (Pr. *Ashtaang*)

**Ashtang yog** Eight -fold Yoga.

**Ashtang Yogi** A Yogi who has mastered the eight-fold yoga.

**Aska** The procedure of 'taking' the *Arti* with one's hands. (Pr. *Aaskaa*)

**Atma** The pure soul. (Pr. *Aatmaa*)

**Atmachintan** Thinking about the *Atma's* attributes.

**Avartan** revolution, circular motion of *Arti*.

**Avatar** Incarnation

**Bhagwad Padakruti** Symbol of lotus feet of God.

**Bhagwan** God. (Pr. *Bhagwaan*)

**Bhakta** Devotee of God.

**Bhaktachintamani** One of the holy texts of the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya*, written by Swami Nishkulanand, relating the life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and His devotees, in poetic form. (Pr. *Bhaktachintaamani*)

**Bhakti** Devotion to God.

**Bhavna** Feeling (Pr. *Bhaavnaa*).

**Bhuta** Living organism.

**Brahmacharya** Eight-fold celibacy and being engrossed in *Brahma(n)*.

**Brahma(n)** One of the five eternal realities, Aksharbrahma, the abode of *Parabrahma(n)*.

**Chandlo** Round mark of *kum-kum* (vermilion) powder on forehead (Pr. *Chaandlo*).

**Charan** Lotus feet of God, feet of *sadhu* or any holy person.

**Chitt** The mind.

**Dan** To give, donate (Pr. Daan)

**Dandvat** Prostration.

**Darshan** To look at God, the *murti*, or *sadhu* reverentially, and simultaneously feel that one is being graced by them.

**Deep** See *divo*.

**Deva** Deity.

**Dham** Abode. (Pr. *Dhaam*)

**Dharma** Righteousness, religion, moral duty, code of ethical conduct, justice.

**Dhun** Singing a *mantra* or name of God.

**Diksha** Initiation into the fold of *sadhu*.  
(Pr. *Dikshaa*)

**Divo** A lighted wick in an earthen or metal crucible filled with ghee. Plural - *Diva*.

**Dravya - Paraphernalia, substance.** e.g, *Puja dravya*.

**Ekantik Bhakta** One who has realised the four aspects of *Ekantik Dharma*. (Pr. *Ekaantik*)

**Ekantik Dharma** Composite religion of *Dharma*, *Jnan*, *Vairagya* and *Bhakti*.

**Gaumukhi** Cloth bag for holding and doing a *mala*.

**Ghanta** Large Bell.

**Ghanta** Small bell with handle, rung during *Arti*. Also known as *Gbantadi*. (Guj.)

**Ghar** A house.

**Ghar mandir** A home shrine.

**Ghar Sabha** A get-together at home for satsang.

(Pr. *Sabhaa*)

**Granth** A shastra, a text.

**Guna** Attribute, a state of being regarding the three *gunas*, good attribute. (Pr. *Goonaa*)

**Gunatit** State above the three *gunas*, above *Maya*. (Pr. *Goonaatit*)

**Harililamrut** A sacred shastra of the Swaminarayan *Sampradaya*, published by *Acharya* Viharilalji Maharaj, in poetic form. It relates the life of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

**Himsa** Violence, to kill or injure.

**Ishwar** Deity, one of the five eternal realities.

**Janma-maran** cycle of births and deaths, reincarnation

**Japa Mantra** recitation.

**Jiva** The soul.

**Jnan** Knowledge (Pr. *Gnaan*).

**Jyot** Flame of a *divo*.

**Kanthi** A double stranded neck chain of miniature beads - usually of wood.

**Katha** Scriptural discourse (Pr. *Kathaa*).

**Kirtan** Devotional song of God.

**Kriya** Act or performance of a rite or ritual.

**Krupa** Grace. (Pr. *Kroopaa*)

**Kund** Fire pit in a *yagna*. (Pr. *Koond*)

**Lila** The pastimes of God and the *Gunatit Sadhu*. (Pr. *Leelaa*)

**Maharaj** Abbrev. for Shriji Maharaj (Bhagwan Swaminarayan).

**Mahotsav** Large Festival (*Maha + utsava*).

**Mala** Rosary, string of beads held in the hand for reciting a *mantra*. (Pr. *Maalaa*)

**Manan** To think on the spiritual discourse and to accept what is applicable to oneself. (Compare with *Nididhyasan*.)

**Mandir** A Hindu temple.

**Mangalik** Auspicious, holy, (Pr. *Maangalik*)

**Mantra** Sacred word or sound recited during worship or meditation.

**Manushya** Man.

**Maya** Ignorance, material universe, darkness. One of the five eternal realities. (Pr. *Maayaa*)

**Moksh** See Mukti.

**Mukti** Liberation from *Maya* and cycle of birth and deaths. (Pr. *Mookti*)

**Murti** Image (Pr. *Moorti*)

**Nad** Sound.

**Nakshatra** One part of 27 parts of which the motion of the Sun is divided into.

**Namaskar** See *Pranam*.(Pr. *Namaskaar*)

**Nididhyasan** Constant reflection after manan, on the principles one has accepted and to imbibe them in one's life.

(Pr. *Nididhyaasan*)

**Nirvikalp samadhi** The highest state of realisation. (Pr. *Samaadhi*)

**Nishedh** The “don'ts” codes of conduct. (opp. to *Vidhi*)

**Panch Bhuts** The five elements (of *Maya*) - earth, water, fire (light), air and space.

**Panchang** Five parts of the body, also (Pr. *Panchaang*)

**Parabrahma(n)** The Supreme Reality.

**Param Ekantik Satpurush** The *Gunatit Sadhu*, the embodiment of *Ekantik Dharma*.

**Parmatma** See *Parabrahman*.(Pr. *Paramaatmaa*)

**Parampara** Line of spiritual descent. (Pr. *Paramparaa*)

**Pitru** Ancestors.

**Prabhu** God.

**Pradakshina** Circumambulation.(Pr. *Pradakshinaa*)

**Pran** Life-force, vital air.(Pr. *Praana*)

**Pranam** Bowing in respect (*namaskar*) (Pr. *Pranaam*)

**Pranayam** Yogic breathing exercises. (Pr. *Praanaayaam*)

**Prasad** krupa, also sanctified food.(Pr. *Prasaad*)

**Pratyaksh** Visible before one's eyes.

**Puja** An act of worship, offering veneration. (Pr. *Poojaa*)

**Punya** A measure/quantity of spiritual deed, merit. e.g. the boy accumulated *punya* by visiting the mandir everyday. (Pr. *Poonya*).

**Rajas** One of the three *gunas*, attribute/state of : activity, restlessness, anger, violence, desire to satisfy the *indriyas* and extravagance.

**Rajbhog** Grand lunch offered to Parmeshwar, and the third *arti* of the day, performed at 11.30 a.m.(Pr. *Raajbhog*)

**Rashi** sign of zodiac

**Sabha** A gathering, a religious gathering. (Pr. *Sabhaa*)

**Sadhak** An aspirant, a novice on the spiritual path.(Pr. *Saadhak*)

**Sadhu** A Hindu ascetic. (Pr. *Saadhu*)

**Sakar Upasana** Worship of God with form.

**Sampraday** A religious movement, a tradition handed down from a founder through successive spiritual Guru's. (Pr. *Sampradaaya*)

**Samsara** Worldly life, cycle of births and deaths. (Pr. *Samsaara*)

**Samskar** Virtue, to improve upon something. (ref. detail on

p.112.) ((Pr. *Samskaara*)

**Sashtang** With eight parts of the body. (Pr. *Saashtaang*)

**Satpurush** The *Gunatit Sadhu*, *Param Ekantik Satpurush*.

**Satsang** Synonym for the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. Literally - association with *Sat* - Truth, which means with God, Gunatit Guru, true sadhus and study of God related shastras.

**Sattva** Second of the three *gunas*, attribute/state of : clarity and purity of thought, excellence, mental poise.

**Sharnagati** Devotional surrenderance to a higher power. (Pr. *Sharnaagati*)

**Shikshapatri** Code of Conduct written by Bhagwan Swaminarayan. (Pr. *Shikshaapatri*)

**Siddh** An adept, one who has attained realisation.

**Sparsh** Touch.

**Sthitapragna** One whose intellect is stable, undeflectable.

**Swami** Master, leader, *sadhu*.

**Tamas** Third of the three *gunas*, attribute/state of: inactivity, lethargy, darkness and ignorance.

**Tapa** Austerity, self-abnegation, such as fasting and bearing extremes of heat and cold.

**Thakorji** Parmatma, also murtis in the Ghar mandir.

**Thal** Food offered to God - with or without singing the appropriate *kirtans*.(Pr. *Thaal*)

**Tilak** Imprint on forehead, chest and upper arms.

**Tirth** Sacred place.

**Tirth Yatra** Pilgrimage.

**Tulsi** Sacred plant (*Ocimum sanctum*, the Holy Basil) revered in the Hindu Dharma, symbol of yagna bhavna.

**Upasana** Worship of God with special emphasis on His greatness and glory. (Pr. *Upaasanaa*)

**Utsav** Festival.

**Vachanamrut** A single discourse in the Vachanamrut.  
(Pr. *Vachanaamrut*)

**Vachanamrutam** Sacred shastra of the Swaminarayan  
*Sampradaya*. Comprises teachings of Bhagwan Swaminarayan.

**Vairagya** Detachment. (Pr. *Vairaagya*)

**Vartman** Ritual of initiation. (ref. Ch. 5. Kanthi, no.5)  
(Pr. *Vartamaan*)

**Varun** Deity of water.

**Vasana** Baser instincts of the *Jiva* such as lust, anger, greed,  
pride/ego, hate, jealousy, etc. (Pr. *Vaasanaa*).

**Vidhano** Injunctions. (Pr. *Vidhaano*)

**Vidhi** Ritual, acts, procedures, also the “do’s” codes of conduct  
(opp. of *nishedh*).

**Vrutti** Attention. (Pr. *Vrootti*)

**Yatra** Pilgrimage.

**Yatrik** Pilgrim.

**Zalar** Small brass gong rung during *arti*.  
(Pr. *Zaalar*)